Evolution of Vietnamese nationalism

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THE EVOLUTION OF VIETNAMESE NATIONALISM

By

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B.A., University of Montana, 1963

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PREFACE

My first exposure to Vietnam was through two, one-year assignments (1966-67 and 1968-69) in that country as a member of the United States Army. Meeting the people of Vietnam was a startling experience. Here was a nation at war. Yet, the people did not seem to care—they appeared fatalistic, indifferent, and uninvolved—hardly the response one expects from people whose state is engrossed in warfare! Was this impression of the Vietnamese accurate or was there more to the story?

Later, as a graduate student, I wanted to pursue this question and gain a more comprehensive understanding of Vietnam. After some initial research work on the subject, I became fascinated with the apparent emergence of Vietnamese nationalism. Its germination and intensification had been stimulated and perpetuated by the impact of French colonization. By the end of World War II, this phenomenon had become a preeminent force in Vietnam. Although my first intention was to follow the evolution of Vietnamese nationalism to the present time, it soon became obvious that such a scope would be too massive for a masters thesis. Therefore, I limited the study to the end of the French-Indochina War.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Vietnam was one of many underdeveloped countries to feel the effects and suffer the consequences of nineteenth century Western imperialism. Conquered by the French in approximately 1885, it took the Vietnamese seventy years to force the French to retreat from this land. The impetus for this victory came largely from the forces generated by Vietnamese nationalism. However, to appraise Vietnamese nationalism, it is first necessary to establish the basic constructs of nationalism.

What is Nationalism?

Although the noted historian, Hans Kohn, traces the roots of nationalism to ancient Judea and Hellas, it emerged as a force in seventeenth century England, manifested itself in France during the French Revolution, and then spread throughout the European continent in the nineteenth century. According to Barbara Ward, nationalism is a force which has dominated the recent history of mankind. "... we are perfectly justified in saying that nationalism is by far the strongest political force with which we have to reckon." Nationalism generates tremendous power because under its banner it can employ the

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resources of its state and gain the emotional support of its people to accomplish national goals. However, nationalism defies a precise definition.

Professor Boyd C. Shafer states, "Nationalism . . . is not a neat, fixed concept but a varying combination of beliefs and conditions." Consequently, to grasp the meaning of nationalism these conditions and beliefs must be studied. H. A. L. Fisher believes the key to understanding nationalism is the word, "common": "What is essential to the growth of the national spirit is a common history—common sufferings, common triumphs, common achievements, common memories, and, it may be added, common aspirations." Shafer, substantiating Fisher's theory, sees the only reasonable way to get at the nature of nationalism is to determine what beliefs and what conditions are most commonly present, and lists ten:

1. A certain defined (often vaguely) unit of territory (whether possessed or coveted).
2. Some common cultural characteristics such as language (or widely understood languages), customs, manners, and literature (folk tales and lore are a beginning). If an individual believes he shares these, and wishes to continue sharing them, he is usually said to be a member of the nationality.
3. Some common dominant social (as christian) and economic (as capitalistic or recently communistic) institutions.
4. A common independent or sovereign government (type does not matter) or the desire for one . . .
5. A belief in a common history . . . and in a common origin . . .

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6. A love or esteem for fellow nationals (not necessarily as individuals).
7. A devotion to the entity called the nation, which embodies the common territory, culture, social and economic institutions, government, and the fellow nationals, and which is at the same time more than their sum.
8. A common pride in the achievements (often the military more than the cultural) of this nation and a common sorrow in its tragedies (particularly its defeats).
9. A disregard for or hostility to other (not necessarily all) like groups, especially if these prevent or seem to threaten the separate national existence.
10. A hope that the nation will have a great and glorious future

In his book, Shafer extensively explores each of the above points. He concedes that his list is certainly not infallible and that exceptions to each point can be found. In fact, exceptions, according to Louis L. Snyder, are a common feature of nationalism. "Nationalism may mean whatever a given people, on the basis of their own historical experience, decide it to mean."^6

While Hans Kohn would agree to the "common" concept approach to nationalism, he puts more emphasis on a national will:

Nationalism is first and foremost a state of mind, an act of consciousness, which since the French Revolution has become more and more common to mankind. The mental life of man is much dominated by an ego-consciousness as it is by a group-consciousness. Both are complex states of mind at which we arrive through experiences of differentiation and opposition, of the ego and the surrounding world, of the we-group and those outside the group.^7

^5Shafer, Nationalism: Myth and Reality, pp. 7-8.
More succinctly, Carlton J. H. Hayes sums up nationalism by stating:

Nationalism is a modern emotional fusion and exaggeration of two very old phenomena—nationality and patriotism. There always have been, so far as historians and anthropologists know, human entities that can properly be called nationalities. There has been from ancient times the love of country or native land, which is patriotism.®

Conditions Which Stimulate Nationalism

As Karl W. Deutsch writes, nationalism is, "Qualitative rather than quantitative, unsuited thus far for measurement . . . ." Therefore, to appraise this phenomenon, it is necessary to observe the relationship and interaction of the different parts, or common conditions and beliefs as outlined above, of nationalism. Kohn asserts that most of the common conditions have always existed and that they, in themselves, do not form nationalism:

They are the national elements out of which nationalism is formed; but nationalism is not a national phenomenon, not a product of "eternal" or "natural" laws; it is a product of the growth of social and intellectual factors at a certain stage of history.10

Nationalism in Western Europe

In Western Europe, nationalism did not develop earlier because feudal, agricultural Europe did not need nor did it stimulate nationalism. The middle and working classes were not strong enough to demand or

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to form national institutions. The local nature and low level of industry, the trickle of trade, and the bad roads certainly did not demand such institutions. And, the slow communication of ideas and the illiteracy of the bulk of the people prevented the rise of that national consciousness essential to the rise and growth of national institutions. However, industrialization, modernization, and the need for national security changed this situation:

The very magnitude of the problems faced by eighteenth-century societies compelled national solutions. Fewer and fewer political, economic, and social problems could be solved by individual or local group effort. Populations increased and men were brought closer together by the slowly but constantly improving means of communications. Trade flowed beyond the provinces, ideas circulated beyond the courts and capitals. Each individual life depended increasingly upon a growing number of others. The nation-state became the institutional will of the group and the idea of nation the symbol of their unity.

Shafer also explains that once the concept of nationalism is firmly implanted, it becomes self-perpetuating. A national spirit becomes the group norm for the populace upon which national institutions are founded. These institutions, in turn, control the people. Then, succeeding generations are forced to conform to the nationalistic system.

**Nationalism in Vietnam**

The emergence of national institutions and a nationalistic spirit in Vietnam during the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of

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12 Ibid., p. 116.
13 Ibid., pp. 100-101.
the twentieth century was not a phenomenon limited to Vietnam. Nationalism in the East was a product of cultural contact with the West. This contact was manifested primarily through Western imperialism—a system which exploited and threatened the existence of the people of the East. Reacting to imperialism, the different colonial states tried to free themselves from Western domination. However, it soon became obvious to the indigenous people that the foreign influence would have to be expelled by force.

The alien rulers' main motive was the accumulation of wealth. They did not perceive the social, economic, and political reforms the people sought as beneficial to their purpose. Instead of change, the colonists wanted to maintain the status quo and therefore attempted to suppress the reform aspirations of the people. But suppression only intensified the desires of the people for independence. The frequency of interaction between the people increased as they united and mobilized in a common cause: "Such a struggle, with a common origin, a common aim and likewise a common adversary, unites the peoples of Asia . . . in the fellowship of a common destiny." 14

Prior to being colonized, Vietnam possessed numerous common attributes. In fact, her society was more homogeneous than were most Western states. Yet, nationalism was not a force in pre-colonial Vietnam because she had not reached that social, economic, and political

developmental stage in her history, explained above by Hans Kohn, which precipitates nationalism.

One of her main social institutions was the autonomous village system. The masses, or the peasants who resided in the villages, were governed by an elite class called the mandarinate. The behavior of all the people was largely determined by the static nature of Confucian principles and ancient customs. Since interaction between members of the different villages was minimal and not influential, the peasants' sphere of interest and concern, generally, did not exceed the boundaries of their village. Even though the people were patriotic, this feeling was confined to their own respective village. Therefore, the Vietnamese village system and social mores subdivided the populace into numerous small groups and isolated each one from the others.

Thus, in Vietnam a condition existed as already explained by Carlton J. H. Hayes. The people were ethnically homogeneous and patriotic in their own way, but they were not nationalistic since interaction between the people was restricted to village level.

French conquest significantly altered this situation. The foreigners, taking over the political power of the elite, instituted new economic policies based on Western technology and managerial methods. These policies undercut Vietnamese traditions and shattered the village system. The colonial administration was designed to make the colonists rich and did not provide for the essential economical or political rights of the people. As the living conditions of the Vietnamese became intolerable, a succession of influential Vietnamese leaders continued to lead the fight for the independence of Vietnam.
In the protracted struggle which ensued against the French, Vietnamese nationalism emerged through an evolutionary process. Initially, the Vietnamese who led the opposition movements merely wanted to defeat the foreigners and to reestablish their traditional institutions. However, as the conflict progressed, the Vietnamese leaders became aware of the profound effect Western imperialism was having, not only in their own country, but throughout Asia. It became apparent to them that their static, Confucian-type society could not compete with the dynamics of the technologically oriented Western states and that a thorough change in the existing conditions was necessary.

This evolutionary process transversed five discernible stages:

1. The Con Vuong (loyalty to the king) movement was the Vietnamese initial response to French conquest. It was led by the mandarin elite and was not nationalistic in nature, but rather xenophobic and regional. By the end of the nineteenth century, the French had thoroughly crushed the outward manifestations of this movement.

2. Although the Middle Class Movement dominated the first quarter of the twentieth century, it reached its apex of power just prior to World War I. This movement was led by Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chau Trinh who agreed on ends, independence for Vietnam, but disagreed on the means. Chau was an elitist whose plan of attack was based on three supporting parts: secret societies within Vietnam were to continue the struggle; their power was to be increased by the development and education of an elite class; and the entire struggle was to be predominantly assisted by the aid of a major foreign power; i.e., Japan or China. Trinh, on the other hand, believed small-scale rebellions were more
counter-productive than productive. The indigenous forces were no match for the French and rebellions only resulted in terror and casualties for the Vietnamese. Further, he did not believe any third power was vitally interested in independence for Vietnam. Therefore, he believed independence could only be obtained by uniting the masses and gaining French cooperation. Although both leaders met with ultimate defeat, they continued to perpetuate the struggle for independence.

3. In the ephemeral calm of the 1920's, especially the middle 20's when the impetus of the past rebellions had been expanded and new revolutionaries were gaining momentum, the Constitutionalist Movement moved to center stage. They represented primarily the rich upper Vietnamese class who had accumulated their wealth by collaborating with the French. While the Constitutionalists wanted political power, they did not want the economic apparatus altered which had benefited them at the expense of the masses. They had hoped to achieve political power by collaborating with the French also. By working with the French, they did not receive more political latitude, but were instead used by the French for their own ends. The Constitutionalist Movement soon lost credibility and eventually their leaders were considered traitors by subsequent revolutionaries.

4. The leaders of the three main movements during the "Turbulent 1930's" were of a new breed who had not only received Western educations, but also had traveled to and associated with the people in the Western democracies. The least significant of the three movements, the Revolutionary Party of New Vietnam, lacked a positive political philosophy. It failed to offer an alternative type of government and basically
was only anticolonist and for the independence of Vietnam. A second party, the National People's Party of Vietnam, did propose a national government along the lines of the Chinese Kuomintang. While the National Party received mass support, its main flaw was the fact that it could not withstand the reprisal measures of the French. The third party, the Communist Party of Indochina (ICP), was by far the most effective. They had access to the refined techniques of revolutionary warfare developed by the Bolsheviks in Russia and later by Mao Tse-Tung in China. Since their propaganda techniques were superior, they could better articulate the grievances of the people and then promote an ICP solution which would fulfill the aspirations of the people. Additionally, the ICP could endure the French suppressive tactics and then reemerge. This was due to their advanced organizational techniques and even more important, their "safe-havens" in China and Russia. Here, after a French reprisal, they could regroup and reorganize their forces and train new cadres to replenish their depleted ranks. Because of these advantages, the Communist Party would have the power to profit most from the opportunity which arose from World War II.

5. After the defeat of France, during World War II, and the establishment of Vichy France in 1940, French Indochina was cut off from her mother country and left to fend for herself. Taking advantage of the situation, the ICP organized the League for the Independence of Vietnam or the Viet Minh. While the Viet Minh included numerous other groups, like the old Nationalist Party, key positions in its hierarchy were filled by members of the ICP. During the turmoil of the Second World War and in the absence of French control, the Viet Minh were able
to organize and entrench their power in Vietnam and build a large guer-
rilla force which eventually defeated the French when they tried to
reconquer Vietnam after World War II.

The purpose of this thesis is to conceptionalize the development
of Vietnamese nationalism by analyzing these five stages. By using this
method, it is possible to show how the impact of French influence
kindled a national state of mind within the people of Vietnam, which in
turn acted as a catalyst in fusing the common aspects of the society
together. As the society started coming together, national institutions
were organized to harness the powers of nationalism and to control its
direction.

To study Vietnamese nationalism, it is first necessary to place
the evolutionary period into a historical perspective. This is
essential because the development of Vietnamese nationalism has been
influenced and affected by her past social, economic, and political
conditions. Thus, the study will start with a historical overview.
CHAPTER II

EARLY HISTORY

A Historical Review

Geography and Population

Vietnam is very unusually shaped and can be described as a "peasant's carrying pole with a rice basket hanging from each end." In the north, the fertile delta of the Red River is one of the "baskets" and the Mekong River delta in the south is the other. Vietnam occupies the Eastern coast of the Indochinese Peninsula and is about 1,000 miles long, extending from China south to the Gulf of Siam. At its widest point in the deltas, Vietnam extends over 250 miles from the borders of Cambodia and Laos to the sea. At its narrowest point, in the central region, Vietnam is only about 40 miles wide.  

Vietnam is approximately the size of California (127,300 square miles), with a population of 35,000,000, which is roughly twice that of California. Most of Vietnam is not tillable—only parts of the delta regions and the very narrow plains which parallel the seacoast between the deltas. The rest of the country—approximately four-fifths—is mostly covered by a dense jungle and rugged mountains. The Vietnamese economy is basically agrarian. Although supplemented by fish and other


2Ibid., p. 22.
vegetables, their main crop is wet rice which can be successfully farmed only in the low plains. Therefore, almost all of the millions of Vietnamese are densely concentrated on a small proportion of the land.

Vast stretches of Vietnamese territory are almost empty of people, others only thinly populated. Yet, in the Red River delta of North Vietnam, a peasant population of 6,000,000 has to feed itself on a territory only one-tenth the size of Iowa. In one of the northern provinces, the density of the rural population reaches 1,000 people per square mile.³

This peculiar land configuration of Vietnam, coupled with the population distribution, has consistently hindered a central government from establishing effective communications and controls over the entire land.

The interior or undesirable land is sparsely populated by numerous ethnic minorities. Since these different groups did not substantially affect the development of Vietnamese nationalism, they will not be elaborated upon extensively.

Early Development

Like other ancient peoples, the Vietnamese have their origins shrouded in unknowns and legends. The record of the development of the Vietnamese is usually divided into a legendary period ending in 258 B.C., a protohistorical period from that date to 111 B.C., followed by a historical period from 111 B.C. on. In the legendary period, there was a kingdom named Van-Lang which was ruled by the Hong-Bang dynasty for

³Ibid., p. 24.
eighteen generations. The first Hong-Ban king was believed to have descended from the royal lineages of the Dragon and of the Fairies and was considered as the father of all Vietnamese. Hence derived the solemn, but commonly used, expression to designate the Vietnamese: "sons of the Dragon or grandsons of the Fairy."  

**Chinese Conquest**

Historically, Vietnam has been pressured and influenced by her giant neighbor to the north, China. Although the early Vietnamese tribes then occupying an area called Nam Viet, which embraced only the northern half of Vietnam and parts of southern China, were periodically harassed by the Chinese, it was not until 111 B.C. that China conquered and ruled Nam Viet for ten centuries. It was during this period of time that the Vietnamese formed a people apart from other tribes who were to be completely sinicized. The aim of the Chinese was to sinicize the Vietnamese also. But the Chinese oppressive tactics only incited the Vietnamese to band together and resist the policies of the Chinese.

Of the different Vietnamese rebellions, two would have future ramifications on the development of Vietnamese nationalism. The first was led by the Trung sisters in 40-42 A.D. It began as a protest movement over the murder of the husband of one of the sisters by a Chinese official, and then it exploded into a violent quasi-general insurrection.

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Defeated by the Chinese after having proclaimed themselves Queens, the Trung sisters chose suicide instead of surrender. Future Vietnamese revolutionaries would regard them as the nation's first national heroes and would try to emulate their total commitment in the struggle for independence.

During the tenth century, the decline of the once powerful T'ang dynasty of China coincided with a growing political strength of Vietnam. In 939 a revolt was successful in crushing Chinese occupation. China agreed to recognize Vietnamese defacto independence while retaining over it a nominal suzerainty. This relationship was to exist except for brief interruptions until 1884.

Impact of Chinese Domination

The Chinese political system was operated by an educated bureaucracy which was called the mandarinate by the Europeans. To become a mandarin, one had to pass a difficult battery of examinations administered by the government and based on the Confucian classics. In attempting to sinicize the Vietnamese, the Chinese were successful in superimposing this system on the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese, Confucian mandarinate adopted a developed legal and administrative system from the Chinese as well as a philosophical and religious doctrine. The mandarinate controlled and operated the bureaucracy from the monarch down to and including the district level. Only the village councils, which will be discussed later, remained the dominion of the peasants. This process, based on Confucianism, taught the people generation after generation.

generation "their duties to their family and to their community and taught them about the social hierarchy in which each man had to know his place and to behave accordingly." Confucianism sought a stable and static society. It did not encourage independent thought, nor did it educate the scholar in science or stimulate his interest in philosophy.

While the mandarin class was heavily influenced by the Chinese, the lower class or the peasants who composed approximately 90 per cent of the population were not.

After a thousand years . . . the village of the Red River Valley and along the coast were still inhabited by a people essentially untouched by Chinese efforts to change and absorb them. The peasant clung to his pre-Chinese customs and religious practices.

This durability can primarily be attributed to the fact that the Chinese did nothing which significantly altered the economic and social patterns of the peasants. They were farmers, predominantly rice growers, living in isolated villages when the Chinese came, and they were still rice growers living in isolated villages when the Chinese left. The peasant class was the foundation of the Vietnamese society, and it was from them that different Vietnamese leaders obtained the necessary manpower and strength to oppose the domination of China.

The Village

The phenomenon of the Vietnamese village is worthy of special attention. Naturally, there was some variation between the myriad of

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villages which dotted the Vietnamese landscape; however, the basic constructs outlined below were typical of the vast majority.

First, it is necessary to delineate the political structure within which the village existed. At the top of the traditional Vietnamese governmental pyramid, power was concentrated in a few hands. Below the imperial court the largest administrative unit was the province, which was subdivided into districts. These first echelons were governed by appointed officials responsible to the central government. But beneath this system the governmental process changed sharply. The village, which generally consisted of three to five hamlets, was governed by its own Council of Notables:

Officials of the central government dealt with the village as a unit through the village's own chosen representatives. To the state, the village owned taxes and manpower for military service, as well as labor on public works. In the past, the central government determined the quota of payment, whether in rice, money, or men, sometimes long after difficult negotiations with the village headman. After the quota was determined, it was up to the village leaders to decide how it would be met.9

The village was surrounded by a heavy hedge of bamboo or other foliation which gave them protection from invaders, wild animals, and observation by passing strangers. There was very little integration between villages and even less between village and district.

The villagers were culturally and linguistically homogeneous. Within the village the family was the dominating institution. It was based on the concept of filial piety, which was headed by the father whose authority was close to absolute. Children were taught "the

twenty-four acts of filial devotion" which was adopted from the Chinese.\textsuperscript{10} Even in death a member did not depart from his family. According to this concept, called ancestor worship, "death is no real departure from the family--one joins the ancestors to exist as an unseen but nonetheless present member."\textsuperscript{11} Each member of the family, both living and dead, held a position within the family according to their rank. Even in the very limited and crowded confines of the home, the dead ancestors were allotted a certain space which was usually designated by an altar.

The Peasant

The life of the peasant was a continual struggle for survival. Not only did his small plot of land not provide any additional abundance in food, but also the Vietnamese society was a hierarchical structure. Taxes were not based on an idea of equality. Funds, labor, and army recruits for the central government were provided by the peasant class. They fatalistically accepted their position in life, provided the central government did not exploit them beyond their means of sustaining themselves. A Vietnamese proverb states, "the laws of the emperor yield to the customs of the village."\textsuperscript{12}

These customs were most often violated when the central government became corrupt, self-serving, and not interested in the welfare of their people. Such a debased government would demand more from the people,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 210.
\item \textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 276.
\end{itemize}
while at the same time neglect the needs of the peasants. As the peasants' already meager condition would become unbearable, they would revolt, regardless who the ruler was—Vietnamese, Chinese, or French.

**Expansion and Provincialism**

In the 900 years between conquerors, the Chinese and the French, Vietnam greatly expanded its boundaries. As explained above, the Vietnamese were mainly a plain-dwelling, rice-cultivating, and fish-eating people. With their land becoming overpopulated, they needed room to expand. Being blocked in the north by China, in the west by inhospitable mountains, and to the east by the sea, the Vietnamese could only find desirable land to the south. The southern region was occupied by two highly civilized kingdoms—Champa and Cambodia. In a protracted struggle that lasted over seven hundred years, the Vietnamese were successful in defeating the Champas and the Cambodians, and by 1757 had stretched Vietnamese control over what is today Vietnam.

A village system was used to inhabit the new lands and to perpetuate Vietnamese customs:

A system of sponsored settlement developed in which established villages sent out pioneers. They were usually young people or others without land who were eager to get new fields and create new villages. Support from the parent villages continued until the offspring were self-sufficient. Then official recognition was requested from the emperor, who bestowed a name, a communal seal, and a guardian spirit upon the new village. These imperial articles were traditionally kept in a communal home which was in effect the symbol of village unity: a place for religious ceremonies and public occasions and in a sense a ritual link with the rest of the country.13

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From its independence in the tenth century to 1500, Vietnam faced external threats ranging from several Chinese invasions to a war with the Mongols in 1257. However, from 1500 to 1750 the Vietnamese had 250 years free of foreign incursions. Yet, Vietnam did not know peace. The central government was unstable, continually suffering from palace intrigues and court assassinations. The corrupt, imperial mandarin officials consistently mismanaged and exploited the lower class of people. As Vietnam moved south and the unusual lineal configuration of the country developed, the more difficult it became for the central government to suppress and control its new far flung territories. Dissatisfied with the monarchy, South Vietnam started to identify just with its own region, and a powerful trend towards provincial separation became a negative aspect to the development of the Vietnam Nation.

Literature

Withstanding provincialism, in the nineteenth century the Vietnamese people had numerous similar qualities. In all regions they were attached to common national heroes, beliefs, mores, traditions, and language. The Vietnamese expressed their common heritage through a national literature which had three levels. At the top was the scholarly and refined literature written in classical Chinese and was the main recorder of national history. The intermediate level consisted of written literature in the vernacular which was easily understood and expressed deep patriotic sentiments. At the lowest and most important level, national literature was transmitted in oral form:

It contained, besides popular wisdom and experience, the legends and the stories which perpetuated among the widely
scattered populace a sense of historical belonging which in

time of crisis would turn into strong patriotism under the
stimulus of national leaders. 14

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**Early Contact With the West**

**Traders, Missionaries, and Conquerors**

According to recorded Vietnamese history, the first Westerners
visited their shores about 1530. They were Portuguese traders who were
followed by more traders and then missionaries both from Portugal and
Spain. In 1627 a Catholic missionary, Father Alexandre de Rhodes,
introduced into Vietnam a system of transcribing spoken Vietnamese into
a modified Latin alphabet. This mode of phonetic transcription, called
Quoc-ngu (literally, "national script"), is today the only written
vehicle used by all Vietnamese. 15 Quoc-ngu did away with the ancient,
complex Vietnamese writing, which was based on Chinese characters, and
greatly eased the spread of education.

Initially, rather unconcerned over the few missionaries in Vietnam,
the central government became alarmed once they realized Catholicism was
a "false doctrine." It primarily struck at the foundation of Vietnamese
society by its stringent opposition to ancestor worship and polygamy.
Generally, a missionary would convert an entire village or certain
segments of one. As the villagers became indoctrinated in Catholicism,
they tended to become alienated from the monarchy. Not only did the
Vietnamese Christians alter their ancient social customs, but their main
allegiance was to a God from the West.

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15 Ibid., p. 16.
In the three hundred years before the French conquest, the missionaries struggled in a seesaw battle with the Vietnamese government. The monarch as well as the mandarin class were aware of the dangers of Catholicism. The government tried to contain the movement by denying missionaries access into their country, by deporting others, and several times by more drastic action—bloody persecutions. However, the monarchy was not successful for two reasons. First, the Vietnamese Christians were every bit as fanatical as their Roman counterparts. Persecutions did not squelch the movement in either country. Secondly, in times of internal upheaval, Vietnamese leaders sought Western assistance, the Vietnamese would concede trading privileges to the foreigners as well as more freedom for their missionaries.

The last emperor of Vietnam, Tu Duc (1847-1883), instigated a policy of total isolation vis-a-vis the West and rigorous persecution of the missionaries and Vietnamese Christians. France, under Napoleon III, was seeking a geographical base with which to counter British influence in the Far East. Under the pretext of intervening on behalf of the Christians in Vietnam, Napoleon III in 1856 ordered his navy to attack the seaport of Tourane. This initiated a prolonged struggle between the two countries which was to last more than twenty years before France completely conquered Vietnam in 1884.

Predicament of the Ruling Elite

Emperor Tu Duc lost to the French because the monarchy was in a state of decline, and the mandarin elite could not compete with or adapt

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to Western technology. If Tu Duc could have fought a prolonged guerrilla war against the French as the monarchy had done against the Mongols, he would have probably defeated the French. Not only would the war have become too expensive for the French, but also the climate and disease would have dissipated their army. But the central government neither had the support of the peasants nor was their country prepared to sustain such a war.

The mandarin class was in a state of decay: "By being lazy as helpers and busy as thieves, they had created walls of hatred and indifference between the monarch and the masses of the peasants, who had always been the monarchy's only real source of strength." Public works, such as dikes and irrigation systems, were in need of repair and the land was not producing what it should. Food reserves had been consumed and the nation lacked sufficient economic wealth to support a war.

After Tran Hung Dao had defeated a vastly numerically superior Mongol army, the king asked him what should be done if the enemy should resume his attack. Tran stated, "The army must have one soul like the father and son in the family. It is vital to treat the people with humanity, to achieve deep roots and a lasting base." This was not the case in the nineteenth century Vietnam. After the unnecessary misery heaped upon them by the debased mandarins, the peasant felt no "deep roots" or allegiance to the monarchy. Although the army fought well, considering its weapons, it was horribly inferior to the French. The

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17 Ibid., p. 352.
18 Hammer, Vietnam Yesterday and Today, p. 73.
Herculean feats which had distinguished past Vietnamese armies were not prevalent.

Another problem for the mandarin elite was the challenge that Western influence had upon the Vietnamese Confucian society upon which the need for the mandarin's existence was based. A few Vietnamese who had traveled to Western nations told their government the only way in which they could defend themselves from the West was by adopting Western technology. This would demand a radical change in the educational system. The Confucian classics, the heart of the mandarin class, would be replaced by scientific studies. Therefore, the mandarin class faced a paradox: to save Vietnam they would have to destroy their own class. Few accepted this fate; rather, most fought for the restoration of the monarchy and the preservation of the mandarin class. They attached the survival of their inadequate system to the survival of Vietnam.

Thus, it was not merely its inferiority which forced the monarchy to sign the treaties by which it progressively abdicated its sovereignty, but also the obsolete and corrupt political structure.

The Con Vuong Movement (Loyalty to the King)

French Destruction of the Political Order

The first region to be conquered by the French was South Vietnam. The French had planned on setting up a protectorate type regime in which the Vietnamese, subject to French control, would continue to operate the administration of the area. Although the mandarins realized they were militarily defeated, they would not politically submit and cooperate with the French. Instead of continuing in their administrative positions,
most mandarins fled to the country. Those who elected to remain and work for the French became targets for reprisals. As the French completed their conquest of Vietnam, the mandarins in Central and North Vietnam also abandoned their administrative positions and many of them joined resistance movements.

This action of the mandarin class forced the French to assume an administrative role in which they lacked personnel who were technically qualified and knowledgeable of Vietnamese customs. Many positions were filled by unqualified soldiers.

Likewise, the French wanted to maintain the monarchy, but control the actions of the emperor. However, in 1885, Emperor Ham-Ngh abandoned his throne in Hue and hid in the mountains. Ham-Ngu was indeed a valuable prize for the resistance movement. Now the king had abdicated his throne to join in the fight for independence. The French fervently sought him. They finally captured and liquidated him in 1838. In the meantime, though, the French had seated on the throne several other royal heirs. Consequently, the people realized that the monarchy was a puppet and no longer representative of the nation.

The Nature and Methods of the Colonist

The character of the French colonist was not that of a philanthropist, but rather of a person whose main aim was strictly to accumulate wealth. He did not understand or even care to understand the Vietnamese people. The colonist mistakenly took the sober restraint and fatalistic attitude of the Vietnamese for weakness and ignorance. Because his

\footnote{Marr, Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925, p. 47.}
static society had quenched his innate initiative, the peasant appeared shy and uncaring to the French. The colonist set about to accumulate his wealth in utter disregard for the people.

The French grafted a modern economy onto the hitherto static and self-sufficient economy of Vietnam:

The output of traditional crops—rice and corn—was vastly increased. The northern mines were worked on a scale never before known in Vietnam. And the French introduced new crops into the country—notably rubber and coffee. Under French direction, Vietnam became a large-scale exporter of agricultural products and raw materials.20

While such progress was profitable for the colonist, the peasants' condition became increasingly more difficult. While the French exported rice grown in the South, the overpopulated North lacked an adequate rice supply. Working and living conditions in the mines and on the large plantations were atrocious. Since the peasant would not voluntarily leave his village for employment on the plantations or in the mines, the colonist procured the necessary manpower through a forced labor system.

According to custom, the central government collected taxes by levying the village as a unit and not the individuals. Violating the ancient rights of the village, as already explained, the colonial administration installed a Western tax system whereby the individual was taxed. The colonists used taxation as a convenient vehicle to extract wealth from the Vietnamese society. In the past, rulers who received the support of the masses taxed in a rational manner and used a large portion of the funds to construct and maintain public works which were in the interest of the people. Not so with the French. Taxation was

used to finance their administration which included the military, public offices, and public works which were generally not in the interest of Vietnam. The colonists wanted an improved transportation system which would assist them in exploiting the natural riches of the land:

It was evident to him (Governor General Doumer, 1896) that without roads, railroads, bridges, and harbors, Indochina's economy could never develop, in the peculiar sense in which it was a colony's duty, in order to serve its true purpose, to become rich.  

This utter disregard for Vietnamese customs dismayed the people and made them deeply bitter toward the French.

The French penal code, based on a concept of human equality, while utilized to govern the relationships between the colonists, did not also apply to the Vietnamese. Frenchmen treated their native servants and workers like slaves. Not only were they beaten and kicked for their own shortcomings, but they were also abused at times for sadistic reasons. As the population became aware of the French attitude toward them and the foreigner's malefic character, the Vietnamese attempted to avoid associating with or working for the colonists.

Rebellion and Suppression

After the Vietnamese armies had been routed and the monarchy defeated, resistance to the French was slow in mounting. The lower class had been disenchanted with the monarchy, but as the abusive programs of the colonists extracted wealth and toil from them and crudely transgressed sacred customs, the ire of the masses was actuated. The

people, now aware of the role of the French, held them responsible for the adverse conditions under which the people suffered.

Most of the resistance during the Con-Vuong movement was sporadic and uncoordinated. The resistant Vietnamese fought in guerrilla bands, gathered around a few notable leaders. Their attacks against the French were generally not very successful and proved to be more of an annoyance than a threat. However, the guerrillas did stage brutal raids upon the unarmed Catholic communities: "It (the guerrillas) often indulged in fanatic massacres and devastation of Catholic settlements accused of collusion or sympathy with the French."²² The French, not understanding the Vietnamese and considering them subhuman, reacted with violence:

The French easily replaced the few officers and soldiers killed by the guerrillas, not retreating an inch from the positions their arms had won. While their strength remained undiminished, their hatred of the 'treacherous' Vietnamese increased. A vicious desire for revenge took hold of most French officers and soldiers, vented more often on the innocent than the guilty.²³

Although by the end of the nineteenth century, the French had suppressed the Con-Vuong revolt, its spirit would live on. They had reinitiated an ancient Vietnamese tradition of opposing oppressive rulers; a tradition which future generations would follow. Amidst the resistance movements, two men stood out as leaders of national stature. One was Phan Dinh Phung, called the "Grand Scholar of the Realm" from the province of Nshe An in Central Vietnam. He had led a spirited and amazingly successful guerrilla operation from 1886 until he died of

exhaustion in 1895.24 The other was a bandit turned patriotic rebel, Hoang Hoa Tham, better known as De-Tham or "the Tiger of Yen-the," who carved within the highlands of northern Vietnam an impregnable little empire. De-Tham resisted French attempts at pacifying him from 1886 until he was betrayed in 1913.25

It was evident, even to the Con-Vuong fighters, that they were no match for the French and stood little chance of ridding Vietnam of them. Cognizant of this futility, Vietnamese literature composed during this time reflected the movement's spirit which was to perpetuate their cause on to their posterity. A popular anticolonial saying of the late nineteenth century was, "If we fail, hope shifts to our sons."26

25Ibid., p. 32.
26Marr, Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925, p. 44.
CHAPTER III

THE MIDDLE CLASS MOVEMENT

The Con-Vuong movement was not nationalistic in nature. It had been led by men of the regime, the "men of letters," who were supported by discontented peasants. A loyalist reaction had motivated the former to fight while the latter fought for his survival. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the Vietnamese society started to feel the results of the profound social transformation they were undergoing. A small, urban class emerged; and from this dissatisfied group, came the leadership to carry on the struggle for independence for the first quarter of the century. Even though most of the leaders of this era only partially understood the concepts of nationalism and its political potentials, they still played an important part in the evolution of Vietnamese nationalism. They represented a trend away from the static concepts of Confucianism and a shift towards a society based on the dynamics of a modern society. This trend would further be expanded upon by the leaders of the 1930's.

Creation of a Middle Class

The colonial economy greatly altered the static character of traditional and ancient Vietnam. Numerous workers were required for the plantations, mines, and construction projects. Their success "was paid
for dearly with the ruthless exploitation by private French companies of a new sub-proletariat made up of workers uprooted, often by force, from the northern deltas."¹ Some of these workers returned to their native villages, but other did not. Often under desperate conditions, these wanderers joined an assortment of organizations ranging from bandits to revolutionaries.

Landlordism has been a historical problem for Vietnam. When not protected by the central government, large landowners gobbled up the smaller ones. Under French colonialism, the growth of large estates began again and as usual at the expense of the peasant majority which still constituted approximately 90 per cent of the population.² One method both French and Vietnamese landowners used to acquire the peasant lands was the practice of usury. After the peasant lost his plot of ground, he would remain as a tenant farmer who had to pay a large portion of his harvest to the landlord. The peasants had largely prided themselves in owning their own land. In the past, as the number of landless poor had increased, so did social unrest and violence.

From the development of mining, agricultural exports, and the imports of Western industry, a merchant middle class started to emerge in the twentieth century Vietnam. These Vietnamese obtained their status by working with the colonial administration, but they were frustrated. Economically the colons, as the French administrators were called, would not permit them to build a business which would challenge a French

¹Hammer, Vietnam Yesterday and Today, p. 117.
²Ibid., p. 121.
competitor. Politically, the Vietnamese middle class was even more stifled; basically, the French retained all political power for themselves. This new middle class became clearly aware that efforts to restore the Confucian monarchy would be in vain as well as obsolete. From their quest for political and intellectual reforms, a new generation of scholars influenced by Western rationalism came into prominence.

Seeking a Course of Action

The reformists, however, faced opposition from other Vietnamese groups who either wanted to restore the Confucian monarch or the monarchy supported by a society based on science and technology. Throughout the Far East, colonialism had stimulated a social transformation process. Unfortunately, Vietnam's mandarinate first looked to China for guidance in how to cope with the West:

Being a faithful admirer of Chinese culture, Vietnam was transfixed in an immovable hostility toward all peoples and cultures which the Chinese considered "barbarian." Nowhere else is the appellation of Vietnam as "Little China" justified except in its response to the West. In its early stubborn resistance, in its reluctance to modernize in the nineteenth century, and in the spirit of modern nationalism, the overall Chinese pattern of behavior vis-a-vis the West was faithfully replicated in Vietnam within a delay of two years to two decades.3

But external events were to have momentous effects in assisting the cause of the reformers.

Inspiration from Abroad. In approximately three decades, Japan had modernized its economy and had become a major power in the world. When she defeated China in 1895, Vietnamese and Chinese literati who

previously considered the Japanese as barbarous were rudely shocked. The younger literati in both countries clamored for reform. These new reformers translated such writings as Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Garibaldi, and Mazzini into Chinese and some even into quoc-ngu. The next important external event was the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905, which marked the coming of Japan among the world powers and deeply impressed the Vietnamese literati. The third event to affect the Vietnamese nationalists was the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty in 1911 in favor of the Chinese Republic. Vietnamese traditionalists who had based their monarchist beliefs upon the Chinese example were now without a political foundation: "The Chinese Revolution indeed achieved the process of 'detraditionalization' which had begun among the Vietnamese literati since 1895."

**Vietnamese Leadership**

Among the distinguished scholars who gave thrust to the initial reforms and continued resistance, two stood out above the rest. They were Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chau Trinh. Both were from Central Vietnam; they were fine scholars and dedicated patriots. Both had received traditional Confucian educations, but had expanded their education and were deeply influenced by their studies of Western philosophers. They were admirers of Japan's success in modernization and wanted also to modernize Vietnam and eject the French. However, they disagreed on the means which should be used to accomplish similar goals.

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\[4\] Ibid., p. 38.
Phan Boi Chau was an elitist and a conservative. Not only did he want to modernize Vietnam, but he also wanted to restore the monarchy. Chau believed that modernization and the revolution could only be accomplished by the educated elite. On the other hand, Phan Chau Trinh wanted to transform Vietnam into a modern state by educating the people and gaining their support. These two scholars were to give guidance to the revolution from 1900 to 1913.

Phan Boi Chau

At the turn of the century, Phan Boi Chau impressed and dismayed the French. He had won first place in the competition for scholars and mandarins which was held every three years, but then rejected an offer to enter the colonial administration. His mission in life was not, he told his friends, to serve as a symbol of Vietnamese readiness to cooperate with the French; "it was to fight foreign rule." He went "underground" to organize a movement of national resistance. While Chau associated with many Chinese revolutionaries, most of his inspiration and political concepts came from Japan.

From 1900 to 1905, most of Chau's activities were confined to Vietnam. A prolific writer, his early works included a pamphlet in which he described "with tears and blood" the suffering and humiliation of his people and a politically defiant pamphlet titled, "Letters Written in Blood." He traveled extensively throughout Vietnam trying to form small armed groups to fight the French. He visited De Tham, "the Tiger

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5Buttinger, Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled, Vol. 1, p. 44.
6Ibid.
7Ibid., p. 146.
of Yen-the" who was then seriously ill, and gained his cooperation and support for the revolution. However, Chau believed that the French could only be defeated through a combined effort of the Vietnamese elite and assistance from a foreign power. Becoming increasingly aware of and impressed by the Japanese accomplishment, he planned to visit their country. Shortly after his arrival in Japan, the Japanese defeated the Russians in 1905. Elated, he wrote his countrymen that there was only one way for the East to assert itself against the West: "by acquiring the scientific, technological, and general knowledge of the West. These are the weapons we need to regain our freedom." 8

Additionally, Chau sought Japanese assistance and used their success to confirm his own political concepts. He returned to Vietnam in August, 1905, convinced that Vietnam's modernization did not require a political revolution. "A reformed monarchy could work the same miracles for Vietnam . . . that the Meiji emperors had worked for Japan." 9 Unfortunately, Phan Boi Chau had developed another misconception. He believed a cardinal goal of Japan was to free Asia from Western dominance and would, therefore, support Vietnam in its struggle for independence.

With his notion of Japanese support, his next step was to educate the elite class. After obtaining permission from the Japanese government, Chau established a recruiting system in Vietnam whereby promising young Vietnamese were sent to Japan to attain a Western education. To stimulate a desire for studying abroad, Chau wrote two more pamphlets,

8 Ibid., p. 50. 9 Ibid., p. 150.
"Advice to the Young to Study Abroad" and "Letters in Blood from Overseas."  

Chau's constitutional monarchy was to be headed by Prince Cuong De, a direct descendant of Emperor Gia Long (1802-1820). On his second trip to Japan, Chau brought with him both the Prince and Phan Chau Trinh. The Prince was to be an inspiration to the resistance movement by establishing a government in exile and also represent Vietnam in dealing with the Japanese government. Trinh, Chau had hoped, would alter his political beliefs after seeing Japan and would support the restoration movement. However, this was not to be the case.

Although Trinh and Chau held different political concepts, they respected and enjoyed each other's company. But the Prince, Cuong De, Trinh held in contempt. He constantly criticized the institutions of the monarchy and the mandarinate and told the Prince, "Even with independence, we would still be miserable under the despotism." Trinh found the Japanese educational system enlightening, but it did not change his revolutionary plans. In taking leave of Chau, Trinh said: "You should take care of yourself, for you are the hope of the nation. There is no need for Cuong-De." 

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10 Ibid., p. 150.
13 Ibid., p. 51.
Phan Chau Trinh

Like Phan Boi Chau, Phan Chau Trinh also wanted to gain independence for Vietnam, but he disagreed with Chau on the tactics to be employed. Trinh did not believe that Japan or any other foreign power was going to rescue Vietnam, nor that sporadic resistance and terrorism were going to be effective in defeating the French. He stated that:

There are some impulsive heroes who, being either engrossed with history, with monarchism, or with the idea of revenge, sought to deceive the people by inciting them to rebellion. But what could a knife or a bamboo stick do? It is a tragic futility to present bare bodies against fatal gunfire.  

Trinh believed independence could only be obtained through enlightened nationalism. He was scornful of the Vietnamese archaic educational system. He wanted to develop a modern Vietnamese educational system which would do away with the Vietnamese reliance upon either the Chinese or the French languages. The new curriculum would be written in Vietnamese or quoc-ngu, and would be centered around technology and Vietnamese history. This system, he believed, would slowly develop in the masses a social consciousness and political alertness which would be required to foster a democratic society.

The main barrier Phan Chau Trinh's solution faced was how to overcome the French. Trinh, like Gandhi, believed in nonviolence. Therefore, his main solution to the French problem called for a humanistic approach. Treat the French with respect and demonstrate to them that the Vietnamese could govern themselves. In turn, the French were to reciprocate the kindness and give the Vietnamese more political latitude.

14 Ibid., p. 110.
Trinh remained quite vague as to how this approach would lead to ultimate independence for Vietnam. In broad terms, he explained that Vietnam would eventually gain a dominant political position from which the Vietnamese would in turn dominate the French.

Returning from his trip to Japan, Trinh now actively engaged in propagating his ideas by speeches, lectures, and through articles. In letters to the French, he attempted to explain to them the atrocious conditions that they had developed, the blood that had been shed, and even the more blood that would be shed if conditions did not improve. As a solution, he offered his nationalistic concept as explained above. While several informed, humanistic Frenchmen wanted to lend him support, most did not.

He consistently encouraged his people to improve their educational system and build more schools. A group of literati established the Free School of Hanoi in 1907. Its aim was to impart "new learning" to the Vietnamese and had for a motto, "Transform the people to strengthen the nation." It had a broad curriculum which was designed to give students a general background in languages, philosophy, history, and some rudiments of the sciences. Trinh, as well as other noted intellectuals, presented lectures at the school. Like other Vietnamese activities, the school was closely observed by the French police. The French were skeptical of the intent of the school and especially of its teachings on revolutions. In February, 1908, the colonists closed the school.

15 Ibid., p. 94,
By coincidence, several weeks later a demonstration, which was to spread throughout Vietnam, occurred in Phan Chau Trinh's home area. Although the French claimed Trinh had instigated the revolt, it actually stemmed from the policies of the French. Severe economic conditions were making life miserable for the masses. Although only about 200,000 Vietnamese were necessary to supply the manpower required to run the large plantations, mines, and construction projects, life was so difficult for these workers that a large turnover was necessary. After several years on one of these projects, a peasant would become physically exhausted and would have to be replaced. Thus, by 1908 the masses had become keenly aware and fearful of the adverse affects of the French labor practices. Other extraordinary measures such as taxes were making life for peasants in the village equally bad: "By the end of February, 1908, the slogan, 'Don't pay taxes to the French' was circulating quietly among the peasants of Central Vietnam."  

The demonstrations which caught the colonial administration by surprise created fear among the French and they panicked. Just prior to the outbreak of discontent, the colons had been hypercritical of Governor General Beau because of his moderate, humanitarian policy toward the Vietnamese and had forced his recall. The colonist press, which was against reform and had been used to discredit Governor General Beau, now played upon the fears of the colonists:

In the Saigon and Hanoi press, however, which without exception was published by fierce opponents of a liberal native policy, this crisis assumed fantastic proportions, as

16 Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925*, p. 188.
the following lines of a French author writing about the period indicate: "Every time some pirates in Tongking steal a few buffalo or pillage a market, certain papers stress the impotence of the administration. Some say that the Saigon reservoirs have been poisoned. Haiphong escaped a general massacre, treacherously prepared, only by a hair's breadth.... These false reports perpetuate a deep and lasting anxiety."¹⁷

The colons went to the Governor General's headquarters, where a provisional Governor General (Gabriel Bonhoure) was serving, and demanded that the Vietnamese radicals be crushed and the leaders severely punished. Swayed by the colons, the Governor General unleashed the French army which applied massive fire power to squelch the nonviolent demonstrations. Governor General Bonhoure also ordered the suspension of the normal judicial procedures and reinstated the so-called Criminal Commission, "an infamous institution that was activated whenever the French, always to their surprise, were confronted by the facts proving that at least some Vietnamese hated the colonial regime."¹⁸ Hundreds of Vietnamese were assembled before the Commission, found guilty, and sentenced.

The colons blamed the rash of demonstrations on the incitement of the masses by a few ambitious and irresponsible Vietnamese intellectuals. Phan Chau Trinh and other intelligentsia were arrested, tried for inciting the riots, and for being an accomplice of Phan Boi Chau. Although Trinh was in no way responsible for the outbreak of demonstrations, he was sentenced to death. This sentence was later commuted to hard labor in exile and Trinh was sent to a penitentiary on a remote island.¹⁹

¹⁸Ibid., p. 65.
Setbacks for Phan Boi Chau

Meanwhile, after initial success, Phan Boi Chau's movement for independence received severe setbacks. By 1907 he had established a monarchial government in exile, was educating the elite in Japan, and was able to continue resistance efforts at home. But after that date, his fortunes abruptly changed. Japan, needing monetary assistance after its war against Russia, agreed to respect the possessions of France in Asia in return for a sizable French loan. More specifically, Japan agreed to close the Vietnamese school and deport the students, which took place in July, 1907. In 1909 Chau and Cuong-De were ordered to leave the country. Additionally, Chau's secret societies in Vietnam were dispersed, and many of his top lieutenants were either imprisoned or liquidated during the peasants' revolt of 1908, as described earlier.

Chau and Prince Cuong-De made their way to a still independent and friendly Siam where Chau tried to regroup and reorganize his forces. There he stayed until the news of the 1911 revolution in China reached him, whereupon he hurried off to China.

Chau again hoped for foreign assistance in defeating the French: "After the revolution succeeds," he declared, "China will join Japan among the powers. If China and Japan joined forces to deal with the Europeans, not only Vietnam but also India and the Philippines would rise up too." This statement fully reveals Chau's political naivete, in thinking that China would become a modernized and powerful nation.

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20 Ibid., p. 60.
immediately after her revolution and that both the foreign nations would work in behalf of Vietnam.

In establishing another Vietnamese government in exile, Phan Boi Chau's political concepts moved closer to those of Phan Chau Trinh's. His republican form of government, called the Society for the Renovation of Vietnam, was headed by President Cuong-De. Chau was Vice-President and General Secretary. A Vietnamese graduate of the Japanese and Chinese military academies wrote a manual on insurrectionary warfare that was used by the Restoration Army.

Through funds accumulated at home and abroad, Chau was able to purchase several boat loads of obsolete Japanese guns in 1912. He wanted to smuggle the weapons into Vietnam and rejuvenate armed resistance activities on the home front. But sporadic terrorist actions in Vietnam were to excite the French, who again took stringent measures to subdue the opposition. Increased boat patrols made unauthorized entry into the country more difficult. The Criminal Commission was ordered back into existence: "In August, 1913, it handed down fourteen more death verdicts, striking Phan Boi Chau, Cuong-De... in absentia."  

Chau was caught by the Chinese counter-revolutionary forces in 1913 and imprisoned until 1916. Like Phan Chau Trinh, with confinement Phan Boi Chau's active role in the resistance movement came to a close.

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21 Ibid., p. 61.
22 Ibid., p. 63.
Summary

During his era, Phan Boi Chau was the predominant revolutionary leader. His primary goal in life was to free Vietnam. In this endeavor he met more defeats than victories and ultimately failed. Perhaps he would have achieved more success if his political concepts had been in keeping with modern political realities. As already mentioned, his expectation of foreign assistance was illogical. Being an elitist, he formed secret societies in Vietnam which only included the upper class and did not form a link to Vietnam's traditionally greatest source of revolutionary power—the masses. Nor was his battle to restore the monarchy ever likely to have gained the fanatical but necessary support of the people. However, even if Chau had not had these grave political shortcomings, it is still highly improbable that he would have defeated the French.

At this time in history, the French had too many advantages. Although their military force was not large, it was a well-trained unit which had a vast advantage in weaponry over any force that the revolutionaries could have hoped to field. By dividing Vietnam into three sections, the French had established a divide and rule system which was consistently effective in localizing revolts. They also had an effective intelligence apparatus which did alert the French to the early development of resistance movements, thus permitting the colonists the opportunity to crush numerous rebellions in their embryo stage.

23 The three areas of Vietnam were Cochin China (South Vietnam), Annam (Central Vietnam), and Tongking (North Vietnam). Cochin China was a French colony while the other two regions were classified as French protectorates.
The activities of the revolutionary leaders were further impeded by communicative barriers. Lacking current communication equipment and needing secrecy, the revolutionaries had to rely on the more primitive system of the messenger. Such a system was seriously deficient in responsiveness and timeliness. Even a regional revolt required extensive lateral communication in such a geographically elongated country. While the dissemination of information was time consuming, the adjustments which were generally necessary just prior to and during the execution phase were almost impossible to accomplish. Therefore, lack of modern communications was a primary reason for the failure of many operations. Of course, for Chau trying to lead the resistance from abroad, communication was even more frustrating. Basically, he could only affect a revolt in its planning phase. By the time he received results from a rebellion in the country, it would be too late for him to react in a manner which would affect the battle. Such information, instead of being current, was more like history.

On the other hand, Phan Chau Trinh's political concepts were more democratic. For the few years (1906-1908) in which he tried to implement them, he was highly successful with the people. His approach did kindle a nationalistic response with other intellectuals as well as with the peasants. However, the part of his equation which proved erroneous was the cooperation he sought from the colons who ran the country. While these people were probably unrepresentative of metropolitan France, they were an exceptionally greedy group. They could not be expected to promote any movement which did not support their own desires for wealth. Trinh amply learned this point from the results of the revolts of 1908.
Although both Phan Boi Chau and Phan Chau Trinh were released from prison, their effectiveness as the predominant leaders in the struggle for independence significantly receded during their confinements. In the future it would be more their prestige as patriotic revolutionaries and their ideas which would continue to give impetus to the struggle, rather than their actions.
CHAPTER IV

THE CONSTITUTIONALISTS AND THE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

The Constitutionalists

Although there were Vietnamese rebellions in 1916 and 1917, they lacked leadership and coordination. Phan Boi Chau, who was now out of prison in China, attempted to join the 1917 rebellion. However, it took him a year and a half to make his way into Vietnam. By then, to his consternation, the revolt had been suppressed by the French.

Why the Constitutionalists?

After 1917, until approximately 1924, there was a superficial calm within Vietnam. The basic social problems still existed, but the militant revolutionaries had temporarily exhausted themselves. In addition, the economic prosperity from World War I brought extra wealth to the colons and their Vietnamese collaborators and alleviated the unemployment problem which had come into existence prior to the war. A new Governor General, Albert Sarrant, a liberal Radical Socialist, brought important reforms to the country and further soothed the discontent by promising more reforms, most of which never took place.¹

Into this indigenous, political vacuum moved the Vietnamese upper class. They were the landlords who had become economically prosperous

by collaborating with the French. While the upper class had wealth, they did not have political power. However, they planned on obtaining political representation by using the same technique they had used in gaining economic power: collaboration with the French.

**Their Goals and Methods**

The upper class believed that the Vietnamese could not hope to gain anything by using violence in opposing the French. In the colony of Cochin China, from where the new reformist had their roots, the French had permitted an indigenous press. The reformers' strategy was to use their press to clamor for a constitution or a legal statute of guarantees.

In 1923 they were allowed to form a Constitutionalist Party which was the first legal political organization to be formed by the Vietnamese. Expectation of success in the early 20's had gained for them much support from many nationalistic groups. But like Phan Chau Trinh, the Constitutionalis.ts were not successful because the French conceded little more than promises. However, the French did find it within their interest to use the Constitutionalis.ts. Their decline in influence was reached in 1930 when their press, under French influence, supported the repressive action the colonists were taking against renewed outbreaks of armed resistance. Years later, the Viet Minh would execute the founder of the Constitutionalist Party, Bui Quand Chieu, for being a French collaborator and a traitor to his country.  

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 158.
Since the colons would not allow any legal party organization to effectively articulate and aggregate the political aspirations of the people, political parties were forced to organize clandestinely.

Regrettably for the future of both the French and the Vietnamese, the structure of the French administration in Indochina offered no channels through which popular discontent could be translated into constructive political activity.4

The Social Transformation

Before examining the Nationalistic revolutionary organization of the 1930's, it is necessary to amplify on the Vietnamese social transformation already mentioned. By the 1930's, colonialism had done more in approximately forty years to erode the Vietnamese social fiber and to create social instability than the Chinese had done in 1,000 years of conquest.

Changes in the Social Structure

The bureaucracy of pre-colonial Vietnam was operated by the mandarin elite who were not an economic class, but rather a political order. Their political authority was not obtained from wealth or privileged birthrights, but rather through academic achievements. According to Confucianism, the mandarin was supposed to live a frugal, humble life. "If a mandarin was rich, the source of his wealth was invariably the use and abuse of his political power."5 When corruption of the mandarin class became widespread, social customs would be violated

4Ibid., p. 79.
and the peasants would be exploited. The peasantry would become enraged and social instability and revolts would ensue. In fact, one of the most important functions of a mandarin was to prevent social unrest by protecting the peasants from abusive economic practices.

Under the colonist, political power merged with economic self-interest. Not only were the new conquerors mainly concerned with acquiring riches, but most of them did not even care what was the fate of the indigenous people. The few Frenchmen who did express concern for the natives were belittled and scorned as "native lovers." With such goals and attitudes, a colonial administrative apparatus which misused and mistreated the people as they had never known came into existence. Within this organization there was no one or any institution which protected the natives from the new economic forces unleashed.

Due to the economic practices of the French (e.g., Western technology and management methods), social classes emerged in Vietnam for the first time. But, of the more than 17.7 million Vietnamese who inhabited Vietnam in 1931, only 0.5 per cent belonged to the privileged upper class, 9.5 per cent to the middle class, and 90 per cent to the exploited lower class. Of the 3,000 colonial administrators who dominated the Vietnamese social structure, political authority remained in the hands of about 10 per cent of them. The center of economic power

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6 "In the sense in which the classes of modern society are defined by economic function and property relations, precolonial Vietnam was not class society, or rather, it was a society consisting of one single class (peasants) ruled by an educated bureaucracy (mandarins)." Ibid., p. 160.


8 Ibid., p. 74.
and political influence was the French-owned Bank of Indochina, the large landowners, and mining firms.

**Methods of the French**

Within the colonial system only the Governor General was a professional administrator, representing the interests of the French Government. Of the rest, most had not been trained in administration, and their allegiance was to the French economic controlling power. It is significant to note that after the conquest had been completed, the Governor General rapidly lost political power and influence to the non-professional, but permanently entrenched administrators. Through proper utilization of the colonial press and support of certain French metropolitan politicians who generally had vested interests in Vietnam, the colonists were able to effectively neutralize the institutional authority of the Governor General. In 1908 the colonists had succeeded in having the moderate, humanitarian Governor General replaced by the more stern Antoni-Wladislas Klobukowski. Initially pleased with the repressive measures he took against the revolutionaries, the colonists became unhappy when he also took firm steps against their odious practices in treating the natives and their unfair business monopolies. The colonists wanted a Governor General who would both keep the "natives in their place" and enforce conditions under which monopolies and other irresponsible businessmen could exploit the Vietnamese people as they pleased:

When Klobukowski failed to fulfill this latter part of his duty, his usefulness to colonial society was at an end.
angry compatriots succeeded in having him recalled after a mere sixteen months in office. 9

Prior to 1900, Indochina had been an expense rather than a profit for the French Government. France demanded that the colony pay not only for itself, but also for the army of occupation as well. While historically the Vietnamese had preferred direct taxes, the French instilled their own system of indirect taxation. The most notorious indirect taxes were collected on salt, opium, and alcohol. To prevent the people from circumventing the new taxation laws, monopolies were formed on these three items, and they could only be purchased from licensed colonists and Chinese dealers. However, the Governor General lost control of these dealers and their insatiable greed for wealth knew no limits. When the cost of alcohol became prohibitive for the masses, forced sales were affected by threat to penalize communes that did not buy. With the rise in the cost of salt, consumption dwindled, producing a bad effect upon the health of the natives. 10 Opium was sold in a similar manner. Although the monies obtained from these monopolies did assist in making the colony solvent, they created a hatred in the people which would have grave consequences.

How It Worked

Within the in-country economic-social pyramid, a working relationship evolved between the various classes. This relationship had a basic creed: as long as production goals were met, no questions would be asked. The Vietnamese middle class was involved in the operation of

some small shops, low administrative positions, and as foremen for the large plantations, mines, and public works. These Vietnamese foremen, called cai, had almost absolute authority over the workers and showed little compassion for them. The cai not only mistreated them, but also imposed fines and charged them for some alleged services. Often the poor worker would end up heavily in debt to the cai. Since the cai was also a recruiter, he had to search the countryside for laborers. However, as the populace became aware of the laborer's fate, they would desert their village at the approach of a traveler, "who might have a permit to requisition assistance." As recruiting became more difficult, the cai discovered that the most favorable conditions for hiring were to be found in regions hit by famine.

Small shops, such as pawn shops, opium shops, gambling houses, and grain mills, were a common feature to most villages. Although some Vietnamese operated these shops, this was an area dominated by an aggressive, exploiting Chinese minority. The Chinese were a clannish group who did not seek political, but economic power. It is said that they "did not care who held the cow as long as they got to milk her." Therefore, their loyalty was to the political power which best enhanced their earning capabilities. They gladly cooperated with the French for the privilege of dealing with the people without governmental interference.

11Ibid., p. 73.

The land policies of the colonists in Vietnam, even more than the taxes, monopolies, and businesses they introduced, reveal the major source of discontent for the people who would later provide the strength for revolutions.

For more than two thousand years before the coming of the French, the well-being or misery of the people depended chiefly on whether sufficient land was available, whether the cultivable area increased with the growth of population, and equally important, how much of the product of his labor the peasant was allowed to keep.13

The colonists ascertained that the most efficient way to increase rice available for export was to increase the acreage of the large landowners. Employing methods already mentioned, the French furthermore deemed that they had inherited all the land from the monarchy. While this was in accordance with an ancient, but not utilized statute, the colonists by using it were in fact violating Vietnamese customs. The numerous wars and civil wars in many provinces had frequently driven the peasants from their land. In their absence, their land was cheaply sold to colonists and wealthy, well-behaved Vietnamese. When the displaced peasants, usually long after fighting had stopped, returned to their fields, they discovered their lands belonged to someone else. Those few who insisted the land still belonged to them were charged with breaking the law and treated as thieves. Most of the peasants, having no other realistic option, decided to work the land for the new owners. As tenants, they had to give, generally, at least half the crop to the landlord.

During the pre-colonial times, the export of rice had been forbidden. Surplus rice was to be sent either to deficient regions or

stored for times of poor harvests. The colonist saw rice exports as a way to quick riches. Colonial irrigation projects in western Cochin China opened up vast territories for farming. The new lands were sold to the wealthy French and Vietnamese who would produce more rice for exports rather than having the land distributed to the multitude of needy peasants.

The efficiency in the production of rice the colonist saw in the large landlord was not in techniques or methods of farming, which remained the same, but rather in their ability to take more rice from the peasants. This system was brutally efficient. By 1929 Vietnam was exporting some 1,472,000 metric tons of rice, which made it the third largest exporter of rice in the world.\footnote{Bernard B. Fall, The Two Vietnams (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), p. 294.} In the rice bowl on the Mekong Delta, 45 per cent of the cultivatable land was in the hands of 2 per cent of the landholders. Out of an estimated rural population of 4,000,000 in the Mekong Delta, more than half were tenants or landless agricultural laborers.\footnote{McAlister, Vietnam: The Origins of Revolution, p. 65.}

At times the Governor General, becoming aware of the plight of the people, tried to curb the trend of large landlordism. To undercut the usury practices of the landlords, the Governor General sponsored a loan program for the peasants charging reasonable rates. However, the program did little to aid them because the loans had to traverse the colonial social-economic pyramid. In order to make a profit, each level...
increased the rate of interest. Instead of helping the peasants, the loan program merely added more wealth to the already rich.

Education and the Depression

During the 1920's and 30's, the colonial regime adopted a more liberal attitude toward education for the Vietnamese. This applied mainly to the upper class who could afford to educate their children in France. The colonists thought education would enhance their image. A French education would make the Vietnamese aware of their lowly stature, and natives educated in France would return espousing French culture to their countrymen. But, the colons were to be disillusioned.

In France, the young Vietnamese studied Western democratic concepts and experienced life under conditions of more political freedom and equality before the law than they had known in Vietnam. Upon returning to their homeland, they could not obtain employment commensurate with their education, and they were continually treated as inferiors by all colons. "For the intellectuals of Vietnam, whether educated abroad or at home, foreign rule therefore was harder to bear than for the economically exploited rural and urban masses."17

The intellectuals jealously continued to observe how Japan had successfully modernized, maintained her independence, and become a major power. The Russian Revolution and the political concepts of its leaders were being studied by other Vietnamese from the educated ranks. Then, in the 1930's, another external event was to have repercussions in

16 Thompson, French Indo-China, p. 297.
Vietnam. The prosperity which World War I and its aftermath had brought to Vietnam came to a smashing halt as the country felt the effects of the depression.

The catastrophe of the depression hit the villagers from several directions. Their meager rations had to be further shared with the thousands of jobless laborers who had been laid off. As the demands for exports dropped, some colons attempted to offset their monetary losses by increasing taxation of the masses. Instead of facing only malnutrition, the peasants now knew starvation.

By the early 1930's, Vietnam had become fertile grounds for a revolution. The masses were desperate and frantically searching for a social order which would meet their basic needs. The wealthy and educated felt politically stifled and cheated by an arrogant and unscrupulous foreign conqueror. From abroad, they saw how Japan had contained Western influence and how Russia had conducted a successful revolution. From the unstable and dissatisfied Vietnamese society new revolutionary movements emerged.
CHAPTER V

THE TURBULENT 1930'S

The failure and loss of prestige of the Constitutionalists in the late 1920's coincided with the increased activities among revolutionary organizations. The leaders of these new organizations had grown up during the First World War and were trained in French schools, deriving most of their political ideas directly from Westerners themselves. There were three primary movements: the Vietnam Quoc-Dan Dang (National People's Party of Vietnam, hereafter VNQDD), the Vietnam Thanh-Nien Cach-Mang Dong Chi Ho (Vietnam Revolutionary Youth Association, hereafter Thanh-Nien) succeeded in the end by the Dong-Duong Cong-San Dang (Indochina Communist Party, hereafter the ICP), and the string of successive organizations known generally as the Tan-Viet Cach-Mang Dang (Revolutionary Party of New Vietnam, hereafter Tan-Viet).

Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Movement

The historical development of the Communist Party in Vietnam was synonymous with the activities of Nguyen Tat Thanh, who was born, circa 1890, in the rebellious province of Nghe An in North Central Vietnam. Thanh was to become well known to the colonist by the alias Nguyen Ai

1 Besides being the home of numerous ancient revolutionaries, such modern movement leaders as Phan Boi Chau and Phan Dinh Phung were also born in Nghe An. Hence, it has been called, "the cradle of revolutionaries."
Quoc (Nguyen the Patriot), and later he became internationally known under another alias, Ho Chi Minh.

Thanh's father was a famous mandarin scholar who had been fired by the colonists because of his nationalist sympathies. Influenced by his father, as well as the leaders of the various patriotic resistance movements, Thanh grew up with the goal of freeing Vietnam. Around 1911-1912, he cut short his secondary studies and took a job as cabin boy aboard a French commercial liner. He traveled to Europe and allegedly to the United States. Thanh was startled to discover that the proletariat was being exploited worldwide. Upon reaching France, where he was to remain for several years, Thanh became familiar with an Asian anticolonialist group, among whom was the legendary Phan Chau Trinh. Trinh and Thanh became friends, with the former introducing the latter to members of the French Socialist Party and by giving Thanh the name of Nguyen Ai Quoc.

**Nguyen Ai Quoc Becomes a Communist**

Perhaps nothing fired up the imagination and hopes of the Vietnamese intellectuals more than did the inspiring words of the President of the United States in his Fourteen-Point Message. If "self determination of peoples" was to become a reality, then Vietnam would no longer be a conquered land. Quoc, assisted by Trinh, composed a document petitioning the major powers for the right of the Vietnamese people to self-determination. Quoc unsuccessfully attempted to present the document at the Versailles Peace Conference. He discovered that the Western diplomats had little time or interest in Vietnamese grievances.
or desire for autonomy. He later said, "Liberty, equality and fraternity, although real enough in France, apparently were not for export."^2

As a member of the French Socialist Party, in 1920, Quoc attended one of their meetings in which they discussed the question of whether the French Socialist Party should remain in the Second International, should a Second-and-a-half International be founded, or should the Socialist Party join Lenin's Third International? Quoc wanted the French Socialist Party to join the latter because Lenin had taken a position favorable for the colonized peoples. During the proceeding Quoc stated:

I do not understand strategy, tactics, all these big words and techniques you are discussing. I nevertheless understand well one thing, namely that the Third International cares a great deal about the colonial question. Its delegates promise to help the colonized peoples to regain their freedom and independence. The members of the Second International have not said a word on the fate of the colonial lands.\(^3\)

After the meeting, Quoc and other members of the Socialist Party favoring the Third International banded together to form the French Communist Party.

Thus, disillusioned by Western diplomats, Nguyen Ai Quoc had turned to political concepts of Marx and especially Lenin. From the Russian Revolution, the Communists had further refined the art of revolutionary warfare. Now, Quoc had become a member of a system which, if effectively adopted, would enable him to organize and control the capabilities of his country against the alien minority.

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^2Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, p. 75.

For the next several years, Quoc actively participated in the Communist Party in both France and Moscow where he received extensive training. Then, in 1925, he was sent to Canton where he assumed his most famous alias, Ho Chi Minh. As a cover, he was sent as a Chinese translator for Comrade Borodin, the Comintern's envoy to the Chinese Revolutionary Government. But Ho's real purpose was to organize the sizable group of Vietnamese exiles who lived in Canton. He accomplished this task by establishing the Thanh Nien (Association of Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth). The Thanh Nien's blueprint for a revolution which would defeat the French consisted of three main points as defined by Ho Chi Minh:

1. The revolution is a task for the broad working class and peasant masses, not for a handful of men. Hence the need to organize the masses.

2. The revolution must be directed by a Marxist-Leninist Party.

3. The revolutionary movement in every country must be in close touch with the international proletariat. Action must be taken to ensure that the working class and the toiling masses are able to distinguish the Third International from the Second.

Organization and Methods of the Thanh Nien

Vietnam was to be organized into a hierarchy of cell committees, pyramiding upward from village sections through sections representing larger administrative units and culminating in a central directing

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5 Ibid., p. 49.
committee. The base of the pyramid, being the most important, was to be constructed first. Party members trained in Canton were secretly sent back to Vietnam to organize the villages into a cell system. By 1927 a force of 200 highly trained, motivated, and dedicated cadre members were busy at work.

Cadre members were not assigned to just any village; they were sent back to their own village. Their first step was to establish themselves within the community, and through informal inquiries, learn the grievances and aspirations of the inhabitants. In these discussions, the cadre man would identify and develop a close friendship with the most discontented and dissatisfied members of the community. Slowly, the party representative would bring selected ones within his confidence; and, finding them amendable, he would teach them the methods of Communism. Then, they would become his cadre members. In future discussion, the cadre men would subtly blame the French and the members of the landlord class, who were called "running dogs of the French," for their grievances and for the stifling of their aspirations. As hatred for the French mounted, so did a nationalistic spirit that demanded independence.

The cadre cells worked to harness the power and spirit of nationalism. They told a responsive community that everyone had a job to perform in the struggle for freedom and that the village had to organize. Peasants, workers, women, and youth were all placed within an organization that was controlled by the cadre. The people were never told

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6 Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, p. 80.
7 Fall, The Two Vietnams, pp. 92-93.
8 Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, p. 249.
their struggle was for Communism; the revolution was always for the abolition of colonialism and the creation of an independent Vietnam.

This system was effective because it dominated and completely controlled the individual. The organizational committees permitted spying on the family. Children were separated from their parents as well as parents from each other. During meetings, all were told of their different responsibilities, which included informing on anyone committing an act against the independence movement. Generally, offenders were warned for minor offenses. Then stronger action, including death, was administered for repeaters or for major crimes.

According to Communist organizational techniques, leaders of a movement were supposed to conceal their identity. In the haste and immaturity of the first cell leaders of the Thanh Nien, this point was carelessly neglected and eventually led to the destruction of many cells during the reprisals of the 1930's. However, those leaders who had followed the principle, and future cells leaders who had learned by the costly mistakes of their predecessors, implemented this principle of concealment by an organizational scheme.

Prior to a meeting, the leader instructed his subordinates as to the direction and aims he wanted the meeting to obtain. Then, during the meeting his lieutenants, dispersed among the people, controlled the direction and tempo of the gathering. The cadre tried to make the affair appear as a spontaneous reaction. As a meeting unfolded, it was difficult to observe if a rebellious statement was made by a cadre member or by an emotional peasant giving vent to his frustrations and misery; and the prodding and comments necessary to ignite the spirit of vexation was
done by the cadre lieutenants. All the while, the cell leader inconspicuously observed. His main task was planning and organizing the event. The people and his subordinates carried out his plan.

While the majority of the villagers supported the Thanh Nien, there were generally some, who for different reasons, did not. However, once the Thanh Nien or its successors (they will be introduced later) established their organizational system within a village, it became almost impossible for anyone to organize a countermovement.

Thus, the village cell structure was powerful and successful because it aggregated the hopes and desires of the people; and at the same time, it stifled deviation or opposition. As the organization was perfected, later French attempts to crush it met with frustration since the leadership was not popularly known by the people.

The Tan Viet: Success and Defeat

In Central Vietnam, the Thanh Nien movement was contested by the Tan Viet. The least influential of the three revolutionary organizations of the era, the Tan Viet was formed in 1926 in North-Central Vietnam, but had completely disappeared four years later. It was a follow-up to the Phan Boi Chau movement. Like Chau, the Tan Viet did not have a concrete program of social reforms and political actions to offer to the masses. The leaders believed independence first had to be achieved before Vietnam could be restructured. Not seeking the support of the masses, the movement attempted to revive and reorganize the old

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secret societies of Phan Boi Chau. Most of its members were from the new middle class—journalists, teachers, subaltern functionaries, and small proprietors—with an insignificant representation from the lower class.

The Tan Viet became intrigued with the success and effectiveness of the Thanh Nien. The politically unseasoned leaders of the former though a merger would enhance the overall struggle for independence. However, they expected their political concepts as well as their personnel to be represented in the new organization. Although Ho Chi Minh agreed in principle to the consolidation of the two organizations, it was nothing more than a Thanh Nien political stratagem to dissolve the Tan Viet. It was a maneuver Ho perfected and used extensively, whereby he would absorb another organization by giving its leaders positions with impressive titles, but no authority. Thus, from the 1927 merger of the Tan Viet and the Thanh Nien, only the latter reemerged.

Disenchanted with the merger, certain leaders of the Tan Viet tried to reform the movement. To counteract their efforts, the Thanh Nien informed the colonial police agency, the Surette, of the membership of the Tan Viet. Knowing that it was not a threat to the French, the Surette merely kept the Tan Viet under observation until the 1930's. Then, in the process of suppressing a rebellion, the French were imprisoning the members of any revolutionary movement—which included the remaining members of the Tan Viet.

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Problems for the Thanh Nien

Internal and external events affecting Vietnamese resistance movements became highly complex after 1925. Changes in China forced the Thanh Nien Directing Committee to relocate several times, further precipitating a split within the Communist hierarchy. At the same time, within Vietnam the Thanh Nien and the Vietnam Nationalist Party (VNQDD), which was founded in 1927, were both achieving considerable success.

In 1927 Chiang Kai-Shek decided to eliminate, in a surprise attack, the Chinese Communists in his Kuomintang coalition. Communism was outlawed. The Russian advisory detachment fled for home, and Ho and the Thanh Nien Directing Committee relocated to Wuchow. But continuing pressure by the Right-Wing of the Kuomintang further forced the Directing Committee to re-establish itself in Hong Kong in 1928. Since Ho had become a prime target of the surging anti-Communist attack, he abandoned the Thanh Nien and allegedly traveled to Moscow, leaving the Party under the supervision of subordinates. Because they were not able to agree on policy, a major rift within the Directing Committee occurred.

Disagreement and Division

The Thanh Nien held their first and last National Congress in Hong Kong in May, 1929. The purpose of the meeting was to adopt a charter and a program of action which would be in line with the directives of the Sixth Congress of the Comintern. A staunch Communist ideological group moved to have the Thanh Nien renamed the Communist Party of Indochina, but the motion was voted down by the larger moderate group.

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The moderates believed the new title would alienate non-Communist support as well as further provoke the Kuomintang. Angered over the actions of the moderates, three important delegates from the North walked out, charging the Thanh Nien as nothing but "a group of clever little bourgeois who practice socialism and promote false revolutions." They went home and established the Communist Party of Indochina in the northern region of Vietnam.

The remaining members of the Thanh Nien continued their meeting. About July, 1929, they finally sent their program to the Executive Committee of the Comintern with the expectation of acceptance. The Party was denied recognition by the Comintern and sharply rebutted again for being "too petty bourgeois." At approximately the same time, the Directing Committee was startled when they learned of the success of the Communist Party of Indochina. Not only had most of the Thanh Nien organization in the North joined the new movement, but also calls from Central Vietnam were joining. A similar process took place in the South as that branch of the Thanh Nien was redesignated the Indochinese Communist Federation. Panicked and embarrassed, the Directing Committee in Hong Kong decided to rename the Thanh Nien in the central region, which they still controlled, the Annamese Communist Party.

Thus marked the end of the Than Nien, as it now had been completely shattered along regional lines. This fragmented condition of the Communist movement was to remain until Ho Chi Minh returned and reunited the Party in 1930.

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The VNQDD

Political Concepts

In Tongking, in the meantime, the creation of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party, VNQDD, had taken place in 1927. Its founding fathers were young intellectuals who had received Westernized educations and were deeply influenced by events after World War I. Impressed by President Wilson's ideas of national self-determination, the Russian Revolution, and the various anti-colonial movements, the VNQDD wanted independence for Vietnam. But unlike the Tan Viet, the VNQDD had a program which was more than just anti-colonialism. The party was nationalistic in concept and wanted to establish a republican type government, modeled along the lines of the Chinese Kuomintang. ¹³

A New Strategy

To free Vietnam and gain power for itself, the VNQDD formulated a strategy that consisted of four stages of action. The first was a clandestine period of recruitment and organization. Then would come a relatively secret period of preparation which would include military training, intelligence gathering, and the procurement of ammunition and foodstuffs. ¹⁴ Overt revolution was to come next. While the VNQDD believed French rule must be overthrown by force, their approach was new:

What they had in mind was a military coup. Nationalists in the armed forces recruited from among the Vietnamese were

¹³Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, p. 82.
to lead the native soldiers against their French commanders, occupy the main towns of the country, unseat the French residents, overwhelm the foreign contingents of the army, and install a nationalist regime... it also prepared its civilian followers for such military action through the manufacture of bombs and the stockpiling of arms.\textsuperscript{15}

Of course, the last stage would be the establishing of their republican government.

**Organization, Success, and Defeat**

The VNQDD had its headquarters in Hanoi. While the party membership represented both rural and urban people from all three classes of the Vietnamese society, the core of it was based on the urban educated middle class. Patriots from the rich upper class added needed financial aid. Because of the party's strategy, the recruitment of the Vietnamese soldiers had a high priority. The Nationalist Party grew fast during its first two years. By 1928 it had already gained more sympathy and support among the Vietnamese middle class than any previous nationalist movement. The following years, the VNQDD's success was even more astonishing. Inspired by the policies and initial growth of the VNQDD, numerous local and regional secret societies joined ranks. "Both the membership and the funds of the party increased. In 1929, the French Surette estimated that in Tongking alone the party had 120 cells, with about 1,500 members."\textsuperscript{16}

Like the Thanh Nien, the VNQDD had been careless in concealing its identity and had inadvertently admitted informers into the party. When


\textsuperscript{16}Ibid.
the VNQDD assassinated M. Bazin, the colonial head of the hated labor foremen or cia, February 1929, the Surette quickly responded--raiding the party's headquarters, capturing informative documents, and then arresting 229 members of the VNQDD. The French were shocked when they discovered at least half of the party's members were on the payroll of the French administration.

A Poor Decision and a Disastrous Rebellion. For the remaining months of 1929, the VNQDD came under the mounting pressure of the Surette. "The police uncovered some VNQDD arsenals and they were on the trail of a number of members." The leader, Nguyen Thai Hoc, who like most of the party's members was under 30 years of age, decided the best course of action was to declare a full-scale revolution before the colonists' repressive acts depleted his forces. Lacking effectiveness in communication with, and control over his five regional subordinates, the rebellion proved to be disastrous for Hoc and the VNQDD.

According to the attack plan, Vietnamese soldiers in the major garrisons throughout northern Vietnam were to spearhead the attack during the lunar New Year holiday (Tet) on the night of January 30, 1930. But the plan was compromised when the police seized leaflets bearing the proclamation of the revolt. Hoc ordered the revolt delayed until February 9, 1930. However, one of his five regional lieutenants could not be contacted; and therefore, Hoc ordered another postponement of the

18 Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, p. 83.
attack. This time, though, one of his regional chiefs became impatient, and he decided to ignore the second postponement order and mount the attack. The attack caught both sides off guard, "On February 9, 1930, two companies of Vietnamese troops garrisoned at the hill town of Yen Bay revolted, killing three French officers, two NCO's and five loyal Vietnamese before they were overwhelmed by loyal troops aided by French reinforcements."²⁰

Sensing imminent danger, Hoc and his staff fled Hanoi for the country where he attempted to organize another attack. But he did not have a chance. In typical fashion, the French army and police mounted a savage, repressive campaign. Army patrols saturated the countryside in areas in which party members might have sought refuge. In response to any opposition, the army used indiscriminate and massive fire power; including for the first time the bombing of a village. Nguyễn Thair Hoc as well as most of the party members were captured in the massive arrests.

**Supreme Patriotism and the End of the VNQDD.** Sentenced to the guillotine along with twelve of his lieutenants, Hoc left these fighting words for the future of nationalism:

>We are going to pay our debt to the fatherland. You who live just keep on with your tasks. The independence flag must be dyed with blood; the flower of liberty must be watered with blood. The fatherland will need a great deal more sacrifice from its children; the revolution will one day triumph!²¹

²⁰McAlister, Vietnam: The Origins of Revolution, p. 82.

With the death of its top leaders and long prison terms for many of its members, the VNQDD ceased to be an influential force within Vietnam during the 1930's. The few remaining stragglers settled in China along the boundary of Vietnam. But not until the Second World War did they have the opportunity to return to Vietnam and rebuild their party.

The Communist Movement

The Communists opposed the nationalist movement led by the VNQDD. In fact, one of the resolutions in the program the Thanh Nien formulated in their 1929 national congress stated: "The staunchly Nationalistic Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD) must be fought absolutely." The internal problems the Communists were experiencing as well as other circumstances had prevented a confrontation between the two movements. However, with the French destruction of the VNQDD, the Communists now controlled center stage of the resistance effort.

Divided But Still Successful

Even though the Communist Party became fragmented along regional lines in the late 1920's, it continued to expand and to gain influence. Utilizing propaganda techniques developed by the Comintern, the Vietnamese Communist Party was able to reach the people. Under the Thanh Nien, a paper by the same name had been published and smuggled into Vietnam. The paper, similar to other propaganda endeavors, stayed away from Marxist doctrines and bespoke of a nationalistic cause. Ho knew well enough that the audience he must reach consisted in the main

\[22\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 226.}\]
of tradition-bound peasants who would be skeptical of a new doctrine, but desperately needed help:

The masses were land-hungry, debt-ridden, maltreated and repeatedly exposed to long periods of starvation. Here, at last, was somebody (The Communist Party) who spoke of their misery and of the fight for independence in terms that had meaning also for the poor . . . 23

An indoctrination program which was greatly assisted by the cell system told the people the first task which must be accomplished was the expulsion of the French. Thereafter, the Party would hand over the factories to the workers, rice fields to the people, and power to assemblies of representatives of all working classes of the nation. 24 This propaganda campaign combined with the organizational skills of the Party transformed what had been an inert and amorphous rural population into a lively organized populace.

In 1928 the Communists became more aggressive. Strikes were organized in the northern factories as well as on southern plantations. By 1930 strikes had increased from 10 in 1928 to 83, with 27,000 participants. 25 Furthermore, early in 1930 leaders of the defunct Thanh Nien, still trying to regain centralized control over the movement, found Ho Chi Minh and persuaded him to return. Ho met with the different regional leaders in Hong Kong, and after a series of meetings, the party was reunited and renamed the Indochina Communist Party (ICP) with headquarters in Saigon. However, it was not until April, 1931 that

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
the ICP was finally recognized by the Comintern. At the apogee of its power, "in January 1931, the Communist Party had a strength estimated by the Surette at 1,500 members, with about 100,000 affiliated peasants." Outbreak of a Rebellion In addition to the activities of the Communists, the conditions in Vietnam were adversely affected by the repercussions of the worldwide depression, as previously mentioned, and by the indignation the people felt after the French had barbarously liquidated the VNQDD movement. Massive, illegal demonstrations started to reoccur. The Comintern, realizing demonstrations would only net suppressive retaliation and setbacks for the Party, warned against the use of such tactics. But the people were starving and desperate. "In some regions, starving villagers turned, in their need, to French administrators. They marched along the roads in procession, without arms, seeking help in their misery. They were dispersed by force." Other demonstrations were not so peaceful, especially in Central Vietnam, the traditional birthplace of rebellions. Although this was the stronghold of the Communist Party, they were unable to restrain the teeming thousands suffering from starvation. The Party was swept up in the tide of madness.

26 Chau, "Transitional Nationalism in Viet-Nam, 1903-31," p. 233. Hammer and Fall both maintain that Ho Chi Minh was not overly anxious to join the Comintern. By not being a member Ho had more flexibility and did not have to follow the policies, which were always changing in the Comintern. See Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, pp. 90-91 and Bernard B. Fall, Ho Chi Minh on Revolution (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), p. ix.


28 Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, p. 84.
In the two central provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh, surging mobs drove officials out after several of them had been killed. The buildings of the officials, tax rolls, and other vestiges of authority were then destroyed. For some five months, the peasants of these two provinces were their own masters, living in a sort of organized anarchy. Communist cell leaders were able to organize demonstrations, propaganda lectures, and lands were redistributed among the people. But during this unstable time, cultivation was neglected.

Frightened by this revolt, the largest and most successful of colonial times, the French threw "all the machinery of their police and administration into action against the rebels."\(^\text{29}\) The infamous Criminal Commission was reinstated. Suspects were often brought before the Commission in mass and sentenced without real trials or evidence. By the end of 1931, the French had succeeded in smashing the revolt, and the Communist movement was temporarily shattered. However, most of the top leaders of the Directing Committee had managed to escape abroad and would later reemerge in the Vietnamese Revolution at an opportune time.

Aftermath of the Rebellion

After the colonists had finally "pacified" the Communist inspired revolt of 1930-1931, a superficial and ephemeral lull settled over Vietnam. Members of the upper class, still seeking political power; but not wanting to change the economic policies of the French, again stepped forward attempting to achieve political representation through peaceful means. The colonists, wanting to Westernize the backward people of

\(^{29}\) Ibid., p. 85.
Vietnam, had sent the Vietnamese young Emperor, Bao Dai, to France for an education. Upon returning in 1932, enlivened with effervescent democratic concepts, Bao Dai attempted to establish a reliable government. He appointed as his chief minister Ngo Dinh Diem, then a young renowned intellect, already widely respected for his honesty and ability. Diem's efforts to initiate reforms were consistently blunted by the French. In frustration and disappointment he resigned. Bao Dai appointed another chief minister, but his regime remained as only a tool of the French.

Although the Communist Party tried to reorganize on a national scale, their efforts were hampered by the traditional problems of poor communications. The movement was cut off from its top leadership and from communications with the Comintern. Its most important figure, Ho Chi Minh, the only leader with enough stature to unite all the factions, had to flee the country.

In 1931 Ho was imprisoned by the British in Hong Kong. The French, who had already sentenced him to death in absentia, now requested his extradition from Hong Kong. In a British court battle, he was found to be a "political refugee and thus not subject to extradition." Ho was released from jail in 1932 and apparently spent the next several years in Moscow attending Party schools. When Japanese aggression in China (1937) forced the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communists to join forces again, Ho felt that it was safe to return to the Tongking border area.

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30 Ibid., p. 86.
31 Fall, The Two Vietnams, p. 96.
He did so as a member of a Chinese Communist team which was training guerillas. From this position, he was able to assist in the reconstruction of the ICP by training new Vietnamese leaders and soldiers. However, he did not believe the time nor the situation was right for his reentry into Vietnam. From China, Ho was not able to regain control over the Vietnamese Communist movement. In 1939 Ho Chi Minh disappeared once more until 1941.

In the South, the ICP was divided between the Stalinists, led by Tran Van Giau who had studied in Moscow; and the Trotskyites, the more powerful of the two, led by Ta Thu Than who had been educated in France. Events temporarily assisted the growth of the Communist movement, especially the Trotskyites.

About 1936 the material and political conditions in Vietnam improved. The Vietnamese economy was revived as the world recovered from its economic depression. As demands for exports increased, the colons were able to employ the jobless Vietnamese. Although their level of subsistence remained marginal, the natives no longer driven mad by starvation, became more controllable for the Communist organization.

In the French election of 1936, the Popular Front was victorious. The new government proposed a more liberal approach to its colonies. While the colonial administrative apparatus was effective in stifling most reforms enacted by the French coalition, Brevie, the new moderate Governor General, was able to implement several top level changes.

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32 Ibid., p. 98.
33 Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, p. 84.
However, these changes were largely limited to Cochin China. In this colony, the Constitutionalist Party was revived and the Communist Party was permitted to operate legally. However, in the rest of Vietnam, the Communist cadre illegally and slowly rebuilt their cell system.

During the benevolent two years of the Popular Front, the Trotskyites made two serious tactical mistakes. Trying to outstrip the Stalinists, they decided to take full advantage of the new freedom granted by the Popular Front and to do away with the impediment caused by operating secretively. While this new approach added impetus to their political activities, it also allowed the Surette to become well acquainted with the Trotskyites organizational structure. The second error of the Trotskyist Party was that they became isolated from the international Communist movement. After certain aggressive acts by the Axis powers, in August 1935, the Seventh Comintern Congress declared that collaborating with the Western democracies against the Fascist Axis was desirable. The Trotskyist Party would not conform to the directive and became an outlaw to the international Communist movement.

New Suppressive Acts

In 1938 the Popular Front fell in France. Shortly thereafter, the Communist Party was declared illegal in both France and Vietnam. The colonists immediately jailed the well-known leaders of the Communist Party, principally those from the Trotskyist Party. Furthermore, those Trotskyites that may have had a chance to flee Vietnam hesitated since their splinter group had become alienated from the Communist movement.

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34 Fall, The Two Vietnams, p. 98.
and they did not have a readily available safe haven in a foreign land. Elsewhere, though, the French attempts to annihilate the movement were not very successful. Most of the Communist organization had been rebuilt in strict secrecy; and this time its members did not fight the repressive measures of the French, but rather wisely lowered their activity and blended in with the population.

Mistakingly, the colonists believed they had again broken the back of a resistance movement and had put the natives back in their place. While the French colonial apparatus, based on the method of divide and rule, prevailed, the Communist movement had obtained both more immediate and long range success than any previous resistance movement. There are some obvious reasons for this success.

One very clear lesson the Vietnamese had learned was that the French would not relinquish political power through peaceful means. In fact, the main goal of the colonists was to accumulate wealth by exploiting the natives and to share power with the natives would contradict this main purpose. Instead of permitting various Vietnamese governments and officials to represent the aspirations of the people, the French consistently destroyed such attempts by using them to further their own goals. As the puppet Vietnamese rulers and collaborating officials lost the respect of the people, it repeatedly became evident to other resistance groups that only violent revolution could oust the French.

The Tan Viet, while advocating the forceful overthrow of the French, failed to give a concrete alternative form of government and also to establish a link with the masses. Even though the Nationalist Party,
the VNQDD, did present a thorough program, it was based on democratic political concepts which did not include revolutionary organizational techniques. On the other hand, the Communists not only related to the needs of the people, but also their political concepts included a highly refined revolutionary doctrine. Additionally, the Communists had another major advantage over other insurgencies: they were able to obtain aid and assistance from friendly foreign states.

The downfall of colonialism was in the interest of most Eastern countries, but all except Japan were too weak to be a bastion of an anti-colonial movement. The Soviet Union was the only major power whose interest in destroying colonialism paralleled those of the Vietnamese Communists. Therefore, from Russia and to a lesser extent from the Chinese Communists, Ho Chi Minh received needed support. When French retaliatory measures made not only Vietnam unsafe for the Communists, but also other countries either controlled or influenced by the Western nations, the Communist leaders had a safe haven in the Chinese Party system or, if need be, in Russia. During the reconstruction of the Party, especially after the disaster of 1930-31, the Communists were able to train new recruits in Communist schools in foreign lands and then replenish the ranks of their cell system in Vietnam.

"To the outsider, Indochina seemed unusually prosperous and quiet in 1939 when the Second World War began, a docile outpost of empire ready to lend its full support to the French war effort."35 Such was not the case. Events inspired by the desire for independence had united the

35 Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, p. 93.
people and a nationalistic spirit was emerging. The Communists, who had already partially harnessed the powers of nationalism, were only waiting for an opportunity to act.
CHAPTER VI

THE VIET MINH

The Impact of World War II

The Second World War turned the tide against colonialism. After the defeat of the French armies and the establishment of Vichy France in 1940, French Indochina was cut off from her mother country and left to fend for herself. Japan moved swiftly to take advantage of the situation.

Japan Controls Indochina

As previously mentioned, Japan had modernized her economy. Her rapidly expanding industrial complex required an abundance of natural resources which were not available in Japan. However, Asia was well endowed with these scarce resources, but for the most part these riches were controlled by the Western colonial powers. Japan wanted to establish a new order in the East, called "The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,"¹ which would permit her to be the dominating force. She decided to achieve this aim through conquest, whereby she would expel Western influence and subjugate other Eastern nations to her authority. Indochina was high on her list of objectives.

Since 1937 Japan had been at war with China and had sealed off all China's main resupply routes from her allies, except for material arriving

over the railway from Indochina. On June 19, 1940, the Japanese presented an ultimatum to the French Governor General Catroux in which they demanded the closing of this supply route.\(^2\) Catroux had no logical choice but to accept. Through this ultimatum and a series of others, Japan obtained permission to station her troops at strategic points in Vietnam. However, due to the extensive commitments of her army, Japan did not want total French banishment. She wanted the French, under Japanese control, to administer internal affairs, thus reducing the need to station a large Japanese army in Vietnam. On October 5, 1940, Japan formally recognized French sovereignty over Indochina.\(^3\)

Just prior to this accord, a Japanese unit had attacked a French garrison. Vietnamese nationalists, inspired by Japanese achievements and her propaganda of "Asia for the Asians," decided to join forces with the Japanese. A major armed insurrection was started, but the Japanese, instead of assisting the Vietnamese after an easy and quick victory, stepped back and idly observed as the colonists brutally crushed another revolt. This had a shattering effect on the Vietnamese illusion of Japan's concept of "Asia for the Asians." Henceforth, both foreign powers became enemies of the nationalist movement.

**World Events Assist the ICP**

In 1930 Ho Chi Minh believed the creation of the ICP was premature, but created it only to reunite the Party. World events soon altered the intransigent position of the Comintern and other Marxists. Hitler, in

\(^2\)Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, p. 17.

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 23.
breaking his 1939 pact with Stalin, attacked Russia. The Comintern re-established its priorities and ordered its members to work with all pro-ally movements to defeat the Axis aggressors. The only enemies of the working class and the Vietnamese people were now German and Japanese Fascists and Imperialists. In Vietnam itself, the nationalists were no longer expected to fight French rule and colonialism, "but only the lackeys of the Fascism who ruled Indochina as a virtual colony of Japan." 

Taking advantage of the situation, the ICP met with other less important groups in May, 1941: "The New Vietnam Party; the Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League; elements of the old Vietnam Nationalist Party (VNQDD); and various National Salvation ... organization." During the course of this meeting, these groups banded together to create the League for the Independence of Vietnam, or Viet-Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi, better known as the Viet Minh. The purpose of the Viet Minh was to mobilize and organize the national spirit of the masses and to win Vietnam's independence. While the political direction of the Viet Minh was nationalistic and, thus, away from the Communist concept of a revolutionary class struggle, its hierarchy was dominated by members from the ICP. Ho Chi Minh was named the General Secretary of the Viet Minh.

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6 Ibid., p. 1.
The Kuomintang Interferes

As the Viet Minh organization started to show progress, it was thwarted by the Kuomintang. Wanting a Vietnamese revolutionary committee more in line with their type of government, the Kuomintang called a meeting in October, 1942 of the different major political factions of Vietnam, except for the ICP. Under strong Chinese pressure, Vietnam Revolutionary League, the Viet-Nam Cach Manh Dong Minh Hoi or Dong Minh Hoi (DMH), was launched by the conference, dominated by the VNQDD and under the leadership of Nguyen Hai Than, a Vietnamese who had resided in China since 1908 and who held a General's rank of the Kuomintang Army.

To assist the DMH, the Kuomintang had Ho Chi Minh, along with several of his top lieutenants, jailed. Even though Nguyen Hai Than continued to receive aid, including financial support from the Chinese, he proved to be an ineffective leader. The DMH became fragmented as the various group leaders refused to obey the ill-conceived orders of Than, and the organization failed to become a hindrance to the Japanese in Vietnam. Realizing only the Viet Minh could accomplish this task, the Chinese released Ho from prison in early 1943.

In March, 1944, as the Allied forces continued to press the Axis Powers and ultimate victory was only a question of time, another congress of the Viet Minh was held. This one was to determine the platform for a Provisional Republican Government of Vietnam. Again, under the influence of the Chinese, the platform was structured similar to the Kuomintang; and the newly created government had a non-Communist majority. Ho Chi

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Ibid., p. 1.
Minh held only a cabinet post. The program of the newborn government was brief: "(a) liquidation of both the French and the Japanese grip on Vietnam; (b) independence for Vietnam with help of the Kuomintang."\(^8\)

**Favorable Conditions for the Viet Minh**

However, the headquarters of the Provisional Government remained in China and exerted an inappreciable influence on events in Vietnam. Its members, other than the ICP, were without arms, resources, or an organization in Vietnam. Therefore, the Nationalist leaders remained in southern China, waiting for the day when the Kuomintang would carry them to power. Meanwhile, the ICP, working under the auspices of the Nationalist Viet Minh and with the blessing of the Provisional Republican Government of Vietnam, continued to expand their cell network in Vietnam. They established guerrilla bases and won many recruits, particularly among the Vietnamese soldiers of disbanded French colonial forces. Ho Chi Minh, the only cabinet member to enter Vietnam in 1944, joined up with one of his top lieutenants, Vo Nguyen Giap, who was destined to become a renowned military genius. Ho soon controlled the vital Thai Nguyen area in the mountains north of Hanoi, which until the Geneva ceasefire of 1954, remained a major Viet Minh stronghold. As often stated in history, the Viet Minh and the ICP became synonymous because the reins of control were firmly in the hands of Ho Chi Minh.

**An Important Event**

Although the Viet Minh organization continued to make steady progress, by August, 1945, it still lacked the power to challenge the

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French. While the Viet Minh had a guerrilla force which was poorly armed of approximately 5,000 men, the French command had a well-equipped army of 99,000 men. Just as significant, the French colonial apparatus, left intact by the Japanese, still held the strategic locations and controlled the country by their "divide and rule" strategy. But an event of singular importance changed the alliance system within Vietnam.

As the tide turned against the Axis Powers, most of the Frenchmen in Indochina disclaimed Vichy France and became ardent supporters of General de Gaulle. He headed the Free French Government that planned on reestablishing the French Empire. The Japanese, aware of this trend, felt the colonists would eventually rise against them. Therefore, on March 9, 1945, the Japanese unleashed a surprise putsch whereby they disarmed the colonists and imprisoned their leaders.

The entire Indochina situation was transformed overnight. The Japanese set out to dismantle the French administration and security structure and to establish a more reliable replacement for the duration of the war. Psychologically, the Japanese crumbled the myth of French omnipotence and invulnerability. At a more practical level, the Japanese were obligated to encourage Vietnamese participation on every level of administration and even to establish local militia forces.

Traditionally, the Vietnamese strategists have always attached great importance to developing a long-term perspective and also recognizing the "Thoi Co" or the crucial moment when decisive action is required. Traditional aspirations had formed the long-term plan; the

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11 Ibid.
the putsch afforded them the latter. Ho Chi Minh's forces quickly moved into the political vacuum left by the French.

The Viet Minh extended their control over almost all of rural northern Tongking. "Practically without having fired a shot, the Viet Minh could boast of having 'liberated' North Vietnam." From the American Office of Strategic Services, several American army officers joined the Viet Minh to assist in the evacuation of downed American pilots. These Americans, sympathetic with the Viet Minh in their aspirations for independence, gave them more than enough military equipment for their limited mission. Although the small arms received did not amount to more than several hundred, they were new and not obsolete models. The modern communications equipment accepted from the Americans improved the Viet Minh's command and control capabilities. However, the real significance of these new supplies did not lie in their quantity, but rather in their psychological value. The new gear enhanced the prestige of the Viet Minh which in turn aided their recruitment efforts.

A Chance to Prepare. As articulated by Mao Tse-Tung in his early writings, Ho Chi Minh knew that to win the support of the masses for a revolution it would have to be formulated on their aspirations. Not only did the Viet Minh understand the people, but in the last fifteen years, the people came to recognize the Viet Minh as the leader in the fight for independence. But in the past, the Communists had been unable

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12 Fall, The Viet Minh Regime, p. 2.

to gain control of the people or effectively organize them because of the continual suppressive measures of the colonists. From the first "Thoi Co," March 9, 1945, until the French ultimatum to the Viet Minh, December 19, 1946, the Viet Minh had a period of time to organize which was appreciably free of external obstructions. Since they knew France planned on recolonizing their country after the war, the Viet Minh worked with diligence and haste to establish themselves.

The Viet Minh's Strategy

No previous resistance movement had the opportunity or the doctrine to develop an army like the Viet Minh did. Since the Viet Minh acknowledged the superior military might of the French, their strategy was based on Mao's theory of the protracted war. In his long struggle against the Nationalist China government and Japan, Mao had learned that initially the insurrection forces should not try to fight a conventional war, but rather a war of attrition utilizing guerrilla warfare tactics. He specified three progressive stages an insurgent force should follow in order to defeat a well-entrenched regime. The first step was the clandestine organization of their resources, with only limited and highly selective acts of armed operation. During this phase, the guerrilla was not only to train his own forces, but also to develop a supply base that would sustain his later military operations. Phase two was to be characterized by guerrilla warfare. Since the forces of the regime were still militarily superior, the insurgents had to remain elusive. The way of the guerrilla was to withdraw when the enemy attacked; harass the enemy when he stopped to rest; and attack his flanks and rear as he
withdrew. This type of warfare, designed to wear down and weaken the enemy, would lead to a change in the relative balance of military strength. As it shifts in favor of the guerrilla, he would be ready for phase three. The insurgents, now the dominating military force, would switch to conventional tactics and defeat the army of the regime in open battle.

Organization of the Military

The Viet Minh's military organization was rather evolutionary:

It might be said that the three parts of this (military) organization reflected the theory of the protracted war, with the popular forces representing the first period of guerrilla action, the regional forces paralleling the second stage, and the regular army dominating the third and final phase.¹⁴

The lowest echelon, the popular forces, was the backbone of the Viet Minh military organization. The responsibilities of the popular forces were oriented towards the village and were mainly that of non-combatants. While they might participate in some sabotage and small-scale guerrilla operations, their main functions were: the collection of intelligence information; act as guards; undertake construction projects; act as porters; and, most important, assist in the indoctrination of their respective villages. The main theme of this campaign was that the entire population must rise up and participate in the national struggle for independence. This activity tied in with their last important responsibility of recruiting young peasants for the military service of the Viet Minh.

Most popular force soldiers would eventually become members of the regional force, but such transfers depended on two variables: (1) the soldiers progress in training; and (2) what stage the revolution was in. If the revolution was only in stage one then there was not a sense of urgency to build up the regional force. On the other hand, if the revolution was in the second stage, then the training time for the popular force was often reduced in order to replenish the regional units. The largest unit formed in the regional army was a battalion. One of their main missions was to protect an area and its population. They were the troops that met and harassed French clearing operations. Offensively, the regional forces would conduct surprise attacks on outposts and ambush small enemy units. In short, they had the capabilities and were the "mature guerrilla" who kept the French off balance. 15

In turn, the manpower for the regular army came from the regional forces. The transfer of a regional unit to a regular unit depended on the same variables which applied to the transfer of popular forces to a regional unit explained above. In other words, if the revolution was moving toward phase three, the impetus to expand the regular army would increase. However, instead of transferring just individuals as was the case with the popular forces, sometimes an entire regional unit would be transferred to the regular army by merely redesignating it as a regular army unit. The regular army was considered the ultimate weapon for victory. It received the best equipment, uniforms, and training; and these soldiers were the highest paid. Until 1950, this force, still in

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15 Ibid., p. 50.
its formative stage, was cautiously employed and not committed to major battles. As the Indochina War progressed and the situation became more favorable for the Viet Minh, their regular units increased from 32 units in April, 1949 to 117 units by June, 1951, while the regional units decreased in the same span of time from 137 to 37 units.  

Paralleling the development and expansion of the army units, the Viet Minh's high command and general staff evolved from a simple guerilla command staff in 1944 to a complex general staff in 1945. The office of Minister of National Defense, under General Vo Nguyen Giap, was divided into three major subdivisions: The General Staff was responsible for the training and employment of the army; the General Directorate of Supplies and Maintenance handled logistics for the army; and the Political Bureau was responsible for indoctrination. Due to the uniqueness of the latter, it shall receive additional attention.

The organizational structure of the Political Bureau paralleled the military chain-of-command from the Defense Minister all the way to the company level. However, in the platoons there were political cells, which worked with the company political officers (commissars). The mission of the Bureau was "to assure proper ideological indoctrination of the soldiers and the integration of military actions with political objectives." Initially, when other political factions were still represented, the authority of the political commissars was limited; they only dealt with political matters. But as the political alignment shifted in favor of the Communist, their authority was expanded. In

16 Ibid., p. 49.  
17 Ibid., p. 35.
1950 a special directive stated that in case of a conflict over a military decision between the military commander and the political commissar, "the latter's view was decisive." 18

Although adequate information is lacking, apparently the clandestine party organization also operated within the military. Paralleling the official political organization discussed above was a secret cell system. Most likely, it did not attempt to dominate the situation, but rather assisted the commissar in maintaining the Party line and in preventing deviation from it.

An additional advantage the Viet Minh army had over previous insurrection fighters was in weaponry. Past rebellions had to rely on weapons that were grossly inferior to those of the French, both in quality and in quantity. But the Viet Minh had several sources for their weapons: weapons abandoned by the colonists during World War II; weapons from the defeated Japanese army; weapons acquired from the Nationalist Chinese; and as previously mentioned, those obtained from the Americans.

Political Organization

The impact of World War II and its aftermath also facilitated the Party's control over the civilian community. However, the unstable revolutionary conditions which existed in Vietnam make it difficult to explain the political situation because it consistently varied from place

18 Ibid. Also, to pass on an interesting sidelight of Tanham's, he states, "The Russian experience, however, may lead one to overestimate the role of the commissars. In Indochina, as in China, most military leaders were themselves Communists, who had fought long and hard for the government, were generally loyal to its goals, and thus required relatively little political supervision." p. 35.
to place and time to time. Basically, however, the Party continued to expand and further entrench the political pyramid structure (as mentioned above) which had its inception back in the late 1920's. Once the Viet Minh controlled an area, they would establish an overt administration system. Its structure was based on the village Popular Assembly which replaced the Village Council of Notables as it had become stagnant and powerless under the French. Popular Assemblies, similar in function to the ones in the villages, were established at provincial levels. Above provinces were the Regional Assemblies which were under the control of the Central Directing Committee of the Viet Minh. While Popular Assembly members were "popularly" elected at each level of government, the elections were Communist controlled, whereby Party candidates ran unopposed.

Power did not reside directly within the Popular Assemblies, but rather in the Administrative Committees who were elected by the Assemblies at every echelon of government. The Administrative Committees were to be "responsible to higher authorities" before they were responsible to their own assemblies. Initially, though, the committees retained a great deal of autonomy:

While it cannot be denied that the various local administrative bodies were originally endowed with wide powers within their territorial limits, those powers were progressively curtailed as the Central Government consolidated its position in the country.20

19 Fall, The Viet Minh Regime, p. 27.

20 Ibid.
Through this political apparatus, the Communists were able to control the economy and to project themselves into other fields. An effective channel of communication was opened between the Central Directing Committee and the village. Their control over communications was total. Not only could they disperse their propaganda extensively among the people, but they could also check any contradictory propaganda efforts. When the French returned after World War II, this system further thwarted their attempts to reinstitute their intelligence collecting machines. Not only were informers scarce, but even when the French found one, his period of use was generally short. He would be detected by the Viet Minh and liquidated. To the consternation of the French, the Viet Minh often received detailed information about French military plans from the peasant population and their own spies.  

The Image of Ho Chi Minh

The image of the Viet Minh leadership proved to be of substantial importance. To make national leaders known in a country with only a primitive communication system takes time. Over the years the people had come to identify with Ho Chi Minh; to them he personified the nationalistic movement. He dressed and acted like one of them. His only vice was smoking. He did not gamble, drink, or have a hobby of collecting wives and girl friends, as did some of his later Vietnamese opponents. In fact, he was not even married. He did not use his position of authority and power for his own personal gain. The people

21 Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, p. 175.
believed Ho Chi Minh cared about and was completely committed to them. The Vietnamese, especially in the north, by and large loved him.

The French Return

Political Strategy of the Viet Minh

The Viet Minh were aware that the French wanted to reoccupy Vietnam after World War II. Giap stated, "The French are on the lookout for an opportunity to come back to Indochina to enslave us once more."\(^{22}\)

The Viet Minh decided their second "Thoi Co" would be Japan's surrender, which would give them a chance to counteract the French plan. At this point in time, the Vietnamese would establish a respectable government in Vietnam and then seek international recognition. The first part of their strategy was successful:

In August the revolution was unleashed. On the 15th, General Giap and his troops marched into Hanoi, greeted by massive demonstrations. Between August 19-25, the Viet Minh moved to power from the Red to the Mekong. On August 26, Bao Dai, descendant of the ancient emperor head of the Japanese approved government in Hue, abdicated in favor of the revolutionary government.\(^{23}\)

The President of the new government, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), was Ho Chi Minh who threw off whatever ties he still had with the Provisional Republican Government. Then, he immediately requested international recognition from the Western powers. But his pleas received a similar response from foreign powers as did his initial


\(^{23}\)Stetler, The Military Art of People's War, p. 22.
efforts for Vietnamese independence after World War I; therefore, the second part of the strategy failed.

French Reaction

Since effective communications never existed between the two peoples, the French had considered their rule beneficial for Vietnam. Revolts were always the devious deeds of an insignificantly few maladjusted and malcontented intellectuals. The peasants were without real values and really did not care who ruled their country. Therefore, when the French first received word of the Viet Minh's declaration of a free and independent Vietnam, they considered it incredible and ridiculous. Believing Indochina was as they had erroneously perceived it before World War II, the French returned with their superior attitude. The appointed High Commissioner for Indochina, a new title for the French Governor General, was Admiral George Thierry d'Argenliou who said in a series of statements:

'It is the sacred duty of France to re-establish order, respect for the law, wherever she extends her authority.' French soldiers were coming to liberate the Vietnamese, who, according to the Admiral, were persecuted and sometimes martyred by men of force. He reminded the Vietnamese of the culture and the disinterested sympathy and understanding they had received from France and which they would need in the future. Alongside this went his assertion . . . 'We will never give up.'

Unaware that the Viet Minh had been able to unite and organize the discontented people and develop an army in excess of 100,000 men, the French merely thought the advocates of a free and independent Vietnam

\[24\] Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, p. 122.
represented another intellectually inspired rebellion which would be readily crushed.

Why Two Different Approaches?

Due to the difference in circumstances, the French approach to North and South Vietnam was initially opposite. South Vietnam was not as well prepared to oppose the French as the North was.

The historical evolvement of the Vietnamese people started in the northern region of what is now Vietnam. Not until they freed themselves from the Chinese did they start their conquest of the South. Most of the territory that is present-day South Vietnam was only conquered and occupied by the Vietnamese since the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The ancient traditions of the North which had withstood 1,000 years of Chinese rule had not been so well inbred in the South. Therefore, the efforts of the French to instill their customs had its most telling effect in the South. Also, the Viet Minh organization had its earliest roots and was best organized and entrenched in the North.

The most determining factor, though, was the difference in attitude and cooperation the French received from the allied nations which occupied Vietnam right after the Japanese surrendered. According to the Potsdam Conference held in July, 1945, Indochina was to be divided. The area north of 16° latitude was to be under the control of the Chinese and the southern part under Great Britain. The main purpose of

25Fall, The Two Vietnams, p. 11.
26Cameron, Vietnam Crisis, a Documentary History, p. 44.
this arrangement was to permit allied forces to control the Japanese troops and equipment in the region.

The question of reinstituting colonialism had been a controversial subject in the international arena. For awhile it appeared that the United States was going to block France's return to Indochina. But since the United States put a higher priority on France and Britain's support for the United Nations, she conceded the colonial question. While the Conference neither acknowledged nor repudiated French claims of Indochina, the arrangement itself opened the door for them. Britain, who likewise had designs on reestablishing her colonial interest in the East, was amendable to the reoccupation scheme of the French in the South.

In the North, the situation was different. China did not have a common interest in colonialism like Great Britain. In fact, she had been one of the countries exploited by Western imperialism. Historically, Southeast Asia was in her sphere of influence. But China realized, in her dreadfully weakened state, that she could not sustain herself in North Vietnam. However, she planned on obtaining benefits from the French for her departure.

The British Arrive in the South

On September 12, 1945, British troops under General Gracey landed in South Vietnam.27 Within the same month, the first French troops arrived on British warships. To increase their strength, French soldiers who had been interned by the Japanese were armed. Immediately they

mounted a campaign to reconquer the South by occupying all the public buildings in Saigon held by the Viet Minh's committee of the South. The Communists, caught by surprise, started an armed counterattack against the French. General Gracey quickly came to the aid of the battered French troops. He not only employed his own troops, but also rearmed the Japanese and ordered them to assist the French in the battle against the Viet Minh. Even after the main body of the French Army arrived in Vietnam in October 1945, the French continued to receive vital support from the British. General Le Clerc, Commander of the French Army, confidently predicted that he would completely crush the Viet Minh in South Vietnam within one month and classified his task as a mere "sopping up operation." Although General Le Clerc's campaign lasted three months instead of one month (even then the opposition had not been crushed or rendered ineffective), by February 5, 1946 the French did hold a position of dominance in the South.  

In the North--Obstacles  

Meanwhile, the French had found an entirely different situation in the North. China, in no hurry to relinquish her hold on the North, had not permitted one armed French soldier into North Vietnam by February, 1946. After a series of negotiations, on February 28, 1946, China did agree to withdraw her forces in return for trade concessions in Indochina and for France's renunciation of extra-territoriality in China.  

28Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, p. 120.  
29Buttinger, Viet Nam: A Political History, p. 227.  
30Cameron, Vietnam Crisis, a Documentary History, pp. 71-72.
The Chinese evacuation was slow and was not completed until the summer of 1946. However, after they did leave, the French populace in the North was still unarmed and they, as well as the region, were under complete control of the Viet Minh. The French tried to obtain from them a peaceful return of the French Army through negotiations, which had actually started in secret in September, 1945.31 Even though certain concessions and compromises were reached in a series of conferences and agreements, a peaceful solution was not possible since their objectives were mutually exclusive. In December, 1946 hostilities erupted between the Viet Minh and the French in the North.32

A New Type of War

As the war progressed, it became obvious that the table had been reversed since pre-World War II times. The insurgent, the Viet Minh, had most of the advantages.

The French military, who had an inaccurate assessment of the Viet Minh's military strength, planned and fought for a quick military decision. The Viet Minh, on the other hand, elected to wage a long, lasting battle. The French, unsuccessful with their strategy, were forced to fight a war of attrition. This type of conflict favored the Viet Minh:

The Viet Minh had an advantage over the French in all respects except in the number of regular troops and amount of heavy equipment. The Viet Minh had few cities to garrison and defend, no post or blockhouses to guard and hold, and except for the Viet Bac, which was practically impregnable, few

31Ibid., p. 72. 32Ibid.
 territories so vital that they could not be temporarily aban-
donied if defending them proved too difficult or costly.\textsuperscript{33}

Although the French had a modern army, almost twice the size of Giap's
regular army, they had fewer troops available for offensive operations
than the Viet Minh.\textsuperscript{34}

The rugged, jungled terrain also was a valuable ally of the Viet
Minh. When the French did mount an offensive operation, the terrain
covered the withdrawal routes and hiding places of the guerrilla. Because
France's mechanized army was road-bound to a sparse and primitive road
network; in some cases, its modern war machine proved to be a liability
instead of an asset. When an offensive operation would expand itself,
the Viet Minh knew what roads the withdrawing forces had to use, thus
permitting them ample opportunity to harass the homeward-bound French
forces by selecting ideal ambush sites.

In a guerrilla war, there are no front lines or rear areas. The
Viet Minh, having a tremendous advantage in gathering military intelli-
gence, kept close surveillance over the French, searching for vulnerable
points to attack. Increasingly, unsuspecting or unprepared outposts,
convoys, and patrols came under attack. The Viet Minh attack would
generally catch the defender by surprise; and before a reactionary force
could reinforce the beleaguered position, the attacker would disappear
into the jungle.

\textsuperscript{33}Buttinger, \textit{Viet Nam: A Political History}, p. 330.

\textsuperscript{34}\textit{Ibid.}
Terror tactics also were profitable for the Viet Minh because they were able to use them selectively. However, this was not the case with the French. Psychologically, the French Expeditionary Corps was not prepared for guerrilla warfare. Many seasoned veterans had fought in World War II, a conventional war, and expected to fight a similar type war in Indochina. To them, the guerrilla became the unknown enemy—unexpectedly appearing, striking, and disappearing before the French could effectively react. Peasants, acting like normal rice paddy workers one moment, became an attacking force the next moment. This uncertain environment generated fear and anxiety within the French Army, causing them to react at times in an indiscriminate manner against the people. The victims of these unexplainable acts of terror only became more convinced of the evil nature and intent of the French. Thus, many uncommitted Vietnamese were driven into the only effective anticolonial force, the Viet Minh.

Political Folly

Not only were the French unsuccessful militarily, but also politically. Unable to obtain their goal through direct negotiations or warfare with the Viet Minh, the colonists decided to install a Vietnamese government which would be pro-French and would act as a counterweight to the Viet Minh. To achieve this aim, the colonists needed the cooperation of the different uncommitted ethnic and religious groups. Hopefully, the new government would sap the support and strength of the Viet Minh; and then through this friendly government, the French could reestablish its domain.
The new High Commissioner Bollaent initiated the drive for a new Vietnamese government in a speech he made in Hanoi May, 1947, in which he stated:

Any man whose judgment is not warped by hatred will acknowledge that we have rights and legitimate interest in Indochina. We have sown much seed there and we are not ashamed to say that we do not wish to be cheated out of the harvest.

Then, he went on to say how the French and Vietnamese should work together to develop a better Indochina and that "through the fault of a few men, one Indochinese people is suffering" and how peace could be restored:

Let them send us representatives of all their parties—I say 'all their parties' because France does not recognize that one party has the exclusive right to speak in the name of the Vietnamese people.35

Naturally, not "all their parties" nor even a few of the parties rallied to this plea. But Bollaent had a plan which would unite a faction group behind one Vietnamese leader.

Emperor Bao Dai, in exile in Hong Kong, was still a prestigious figure among the other "parties."36 Through a series of agreements granting Vietnam "independence," the French were able to persuade Bao Dai to establish the State of Vietnam.

The new state was not well received by the Vietnamese. Although the different agreements granting "independence" received wide newspaper and radio dissemination throughout Vietnam, the inhabitants still recognized the primacy of the colonists. These convictions were based on the

35Cameron, Vietnam Crisis, a Documentary History, pp. 106-07.
36Ibid., p. 101.
presence of French soldiers and officials on Vietnam soil and the overall dominating role of the French. As late as 1953, the French were able to devalue the currency of Indochina without prior consultation or even notifying the State of Vietnam Government.\(^{37}\)

Basically, the French were trying to use the new government as a method to implement the principle of "divide and rule." But instead of promoting their cause, the new government detracted from their efforts. Some leading nationalists like Ngo Dinh Diem, who was both anti-colonialist and anti-Viet Minh, refused to be associated with the counterweight. The Viet Minh were incensed by the "puppet government" and used it to further exclaim the evil intent of the French. Ho Chi Minh declared:

Furthermore, they (the French) tried to get past our national assembly and our government. They planned to set up a puppet regime in our country and to use Vietnamese people to fight Vietnamese people. We certainly shall not accept those humiliating conditions and we shall fight to the bitter end for complete independence and unity.\(^{38}\)

Other uncommitted nationalistic groups became more alienated toward the French. These groups felt the State of Vietnam Government dashed the hopes of the creation of a Vietnamese alternative to the Viet Minh. With this disillusionment, they elected to join forces with the Viet Minh.

**The Indochina War Becomes Internationalized**

The First Indochina War, which started as a private war between France and the Viet Minh, suddenly took on an international character.


\(^{38}\)Cameron, *Vietnam Crisis, a Documentary History*, p. 116.
In 1949 the Chinese Communists were victorious in their civil war. Red China recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on January 16, 1950; shortly, Moscow was to follow suit. With increased supplies from China, the Viet Minh were able to intensify their military operations. These activities by the "Red Block" were perceived as an international Communist threat by the Western powers. Any sympathy the United States still held for the Viet Minh was changed to fear. In February, 1950 the United States Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, stated:

The recognition by the Kremlin of Ho Chi Minh's Communist movement in Indochina comes as a surprise. The Soviet acknowledgment of this movement should remove any illusions as to the 'Nationalist' nature of Ho Chi Minh's aims and reveals Ho in his true colors as the mortal enemy of native independence in Indochina.

To counteract the move of the Communists, both Britain and the United States recognized the State of Vietnam headed by Bao Dai; the United States started a massive aid program to assist the French effort in Vietnam.

A statistical comparison of the aid received by the French from the United States to that which the Viet Minh received from China is not possible since the Communist's figures are not available. However, Bernard Fall, a renowned authority on Vietnam, estimates the economic aid the North received to be approximately equal "to what its southern rival received from the United States." Joseph Buttinger, another

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40Cameron, Vietnam Crisis, a Documentary History, p. 145.
41Fall, The Two Vietnams, p. 175.
authority, states: "Nor was the failure of the French due to massive outside (Chinese) aid to the Viet Minh."42

With the internationalization of the war, Ho Chi Minh was further drawn into the "Red Block":

French policy . . . left Ho with hardly any other choice. Since he gained nothing by pleasing the West and the pro-West forces around Bao Dai, he put his regime, hesitatingly but unmistakably, into the camp of the Soviet Union and Communist China.43 Early in 1951, the Vietnamese Communist Party was resurrected under the title of the Lao Dong Party (Workers Party) and a gradual purge of all Viet Minh leaders and officials not sufficiently subservient to the Communists followed. Although this maneuver resulted in the defection of some groups, especially the Catholics, from the ranks of the Viet Minh, the aid they received from the Communist nations more than compensated for the losses. However, the Communists retained the support of most of the other ideology groups because the war still remained primarily a struggle for independence and the Viet Minh was the only organization with the power to accomplish this goal.

Things Go From Bad to Worse

An Ineffective Army

One of the great disadvantages of the French, often lamented by their different commanders-in-chiefs, was that with an organized and better-equipped fighting force, almost twice the size of Giap's regular army, fewer troops were available to them for offensive action than to the Viet Minh. It was estimated in 1953 that out of the total of

42 Ibid., p. 774.
190,000 men in the Expeditionary Corps, at least 100,000 were tied down in static defense duties. \(^44\) The French politicians and generals committed to victory in Indochina knew Paris would not supply more soldiers. Therefore, to solve this shortage, the French finally convinced Bao Dai in 1950 that he should develop a national army of Vietnam. Its primary mission would be defense of static positions; thus, leaving the French Army free to maneuver against the Viet Minh. Even though by 1953 the Vietnamese national army numbered about 500,000, the French still had approximately the same number of its troops committed to defense. Of course, the ever increasing strength and aggressiveness of the Viet Minh had forced the French to defend its installations with more soldiers. But more significantly, Bao Dai's Vietnamese army proved to be ineffective. It lacked leadership, morale, and a sense of purpose. Its members realized that they were being used to reinstitute French colonialism and therefore they were unresponsive, irresponsible, and fought poorly.

One of the major problems for Ho Chi Minh had been to determine what stage his revolution should be in. Several times, such as in 1951, he and Giap thought the relative battle strength favored the Viet Minh. Moving into the final stage of their revolution, the Viet Minh challenged the French in open battle—only to be soundly defeated. After such defeats, the Viet Minh would temporarily retreat to the second phase or to guerrilla tactics. But in October, 1952, Giap's regular army went

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 760.
back on the offensive by invading Laos which eventually culminated in
the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu.

Public Opinion Awakes in France

Initially, public opinion in France gave the Indochina War insigni-
ficant attention. There was no reason for the people to change from the
traditional colonial approach. In the past, as far as the people were
concerned, colonial policies were formulated by the government. The
French Expeditionary Corps in Indochina did not contain conscripts, only
regulars; and the majority of them were drawn from other parts of the
Empire and not from metropolitan France. Also, the people were mainly
concerned with domestic issues and were not informed or aware of the
realities of the conflict.

This lethargical attitude suddenly changed after 1952 when
metropolitan France realized what the war was costing them. Many
Frenchmen blamed the Indochina War for France's slow economic recovery
after World War II. By 1952 the war was costing the French 270 billion
francs a year or 33.5 per cent of her military budget. The French
Parliament realized that the continuation of the Indochina War was not
within the political or economic interests of France:

In the eyes of more and more Frenchmen, the war was a
'bottomless abyss, an adventure without a solution, and a
sacrifice that had become absurd.' Even people whose patri-
otism was beyond question began to refer to the Indochina
War as 'the dirty war' . . .

45 Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, p. 299.


47 Ibid., p. 798.
The Geneva Agreement

After Ho Chi Minh had declared himself ready to talk peace in November of 1953, the "Big Four" agreed to hold a conference at Geneva in order to seek a solution for the Indochina War and ostensibly the Korean War. After three months of negotiations, on July 21, 1954, the Geneva Agreement was signed. It officially ended the fighting in Vietnam and established a modus vivendi. According to the Agreement, a provisional military demarcation line was established roughly along the 17th parallel, thus dividing Vietnam into two separate zones. The northern zone was to be controlled by the D.R.V.N. and the southern zone by an interim government of South Vietnam. A final political settlement was to be decided through a general election by secret ballot in July, 1956. The Vietnamese would choose between the government of South Vietnam and the D.R.V.N. Ho Chi Minh felt confident that his government would easily win the election and thus fulfill his goal of a unified, independent Vietnam. "In 1954, it seemed clear to most observers as well as to Hanoi that such elections would be won by Ho Chi Minh's regime."50

Of course, time has disproven the prediction of a D.R.V.N. victory by 1956. Extensive involvement by the United States and to a lesser extent Russia and China in the Indochina War has further complicated the Vietnam situation. By 1956 the government of South Vietnam, supported

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48 The "Big Four" included the United States, Soviet Union, France, and Great Britain.

49 Tanham, Communist Revolutionary Warfare, p. 111.

50 Ibid., p. 114.
by the United States, decided against the election. Although the war has continued, the defeat of the French and the end of colonialism is a logical place from which an assessment of the evolution of Vietnam's nationalism can be made.
CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Characteristics of Precolonial Vietnamese Society

Prior to the arrival of the French, Vietnamese society possessed many of the common characteristics of nationalism. In fact, their society was more homogeneous than were most Western states. The Vietnamese were from the same ethnic background, all spoke the same language, and most of their common traditions and customs were older than Christianity. Furthermore, the people had their national heroes, a common enemy in China, and lived in a well-defined geographical area. However, primarily due to the village system, the Vietnamese lacked a national spirit. Their main political allegiance was to the village.

Over 90 per cent of the people lived in rather isolated and autonomous villages. The villagers were basically self-sufficient and interaction between them and other members of the society was minimal. Officials of the central government dealt with the village as a unit through the village's Council of Notables and did not directly control or deal with the people. What demands the central government would place on a village were limited according to ancient customs. Once certain levies were established for a village, the Council of Notables would then determine how the villages would fulfill the demands of the monarchy.
In reciprocity for this support, the villagers expected the monarchy to protect them from invasion and corrupt governmental officials who would exploit the people. In addition, the central government was responsible for national projects which would be beneficial or necessary for the country; for example, canals, dikes, and a military force. If and when the monarchy failed to meet its responsibilities to the people, and if such failures created intolerable conditions for the masses, then the people would revolt.

Since governmental improbity was relatively common in Vietnam's history, it provoked numerous revolts which in turn had an adverse effect upon the unity of the central government. Revolutions against the central government were generally in response to the needs of a local region and were not national in nature. When a rebellion was successful, its leaders wanted to maintain their newly won power and not surrender it to the central government.

In fact, the capable monarch was best able to unify his country when it faced a common enemy, such as the Chinese or the Mongols. However, these united efforts were not permanent for several reasons. The people and regional leaders did not fight to protect and preserve the central government, but rather to protect their specific interests. Once the enemy was defeated, the people returned to their village and to its traditional ways, and new regional leaders would reemerge to oppose the authority of the central government. However, French colonialism was to significantly alter the character of Vietnamese society.
Conditions Which Unified the Vietnamese

In the seventeenth century, the machinery of the monarchy was in a state of decline and decay, and it had not been meeting its responsibilities to the people. With the people on the verge of massive revolts and continually threatened by the forces of regionalism, the monarchy was in no position to defend against a powerful Western state like France. The French Government conquered Vietnam with little knowledge of that country and even less concern for its people. Napoleon III wanted Vietnam, mainly, for a naval base from which he hoped to counteract the growing might and prestige of the British in the Far East. The early French rulers wanted to control Vietnam with minimal French forces. They had planned to rule through the monarchy, leaving the mandarinate elite intact. But, when the mandarins refused to support the invaders and abandoned their positions, the French then had to personally operate the bureaucracy.

The new bureaucracy was not composed of trained, loyal French public servants, but rather by men who had almost no administrative background. As various private French entrepreneurs moved into Vietnam to take advantage of the exploitable situation, they were soon able to purchase the loyalties of the bureaucrats and hence gain control of the colonial government. This resulted in a self-serving bureaucracy which usurped the authority of the office of the Governor General—this lost authority was never recovered by the French Government.

The impact of French colonialism shattered the foundation of Vietnamese society and created a social transformation within Vietnam. One of the more significant results of this transformation was the
emergence of a class structure. However, within the class structure there were no institutions which delineated responsibilities, rights, and protection for the different classes; there was nothing to replace the controlling aspects of ancient customs which had been rendered obsolete and ineffective. Only the upper and middle classes were relatively free of want. The lower class or the peasants, who comprised more than 90 per cent of the population, continually suffered from malnutrition. None of the classes had political representation and all had to endure the arrogant and insolent attitudes of the French.

To govern themselves, the colonists utilized the relatively equitable judicial system developed in metropolitan France. But the Vietnamese did not have access to this judicial system. Basically, they were at the mercy of the colonists. Vietnamese who collaborated with the colonists in their efforts to exploit Vietnam were granted special privileges. Since a colon could also withdraw privileges at his own discretion, the position of a colon's favorite was a precarious one.

Of course, the class that suffered the most was the lower class. They had to contend with the colonial system which demanded more of what they, the people, produced, while not significantly improving production methods. The economy of the peasants varied with the prosperity of the colonists. When exports were in demand and prices high, the people's subsistence was marginal. But, when prices and demands fell, the people knew starvation. Since any improvement in the plight of the peasantry was not within the economic interest of the colonists, the lower class was left without protection. They were exploited by both the French and the upper classes of Vietnamese, especially by the large landowner.
Vietnam's initial reaction to the French conquest was mixed. There was a tinge of xenophobia, the mandarins were fearful of the new concepts of the foreigners, but most of the people were apathetic. They had been disgruntled and displeased with the corrupt central government and did not think the French could be any worse. This perception soon changed. Indeed, as the colonists instituted their debased methods of governing, the apprehension of the Vietnamese became deeper and more encompassing than had been their initial response. Their anxiety was based upon the nature and methods of the colonial system which was degrading to the dignity of all Vietnamese and actually threatening the very survival of most of the Vietnamese. If the Vietnamese were to persist as a people, then they had to free Vietnam from the tyranny of the colonial bureaucracy.

The Struggle and Its Evolutionary Effects

To rid Vietnam of the French, the Vietnamese had four basic courses of action: (1) they could attempt to obtain a position of political predominance by working with the colonists; (2) they could try to forcefully dispel the foreigners; (3) they could try to gain the support of a major power which could force the French out of Vietnam; or, (4) they could use any successful combination of the other three courses of action.

From 1900 until the 1940's, different groups or organizations attempted to achieve an independent Vietnam by following one of the courses of action. Although each one was suppressed by the French, these defeats, coupled with the persisting adverse social conditions and the influence from external events, did not check the people's desire for
their independence, but rather intensified the struggle. This intensification actually had an evolutionary effect upon both the Vietnamese methods of revolution and goals for government: each will be reviewed separately.

By the 1930's Ho Chi Minh, as well as other contemporary revolutionaries, realized that to defeat the French, only one option would be effective. Movements lead by Phan Chau Trinh and the Constitutionalists had proved to them that political representation could not be attained through French cooperation. Phan Boi Chau's experiences taught the Vietnamese leaders of the 1930's that they could not expect a third major power to defeat the French for them. Therefore, the Vietnamese would have to rely mainly on their own resources to defeat the French.

From the leaders of the Russian Revolution, Ho Chi Minh was able to expand his knowledge on revolutionary methodology. Looking back and evaluating his own endeavors, an old Phan Boi Chau told the young Ho Chi Minh that "those who wish to liberate the country will have to form a strong party."¹ Not only did Ho find in the Communist movement the advanced organizational and revolutionary methods necessary to build a strong party, but also a valuable ally. Since the destruction of colonialism was, likewise, within the interest of the Comintern, it gave limited but critical support to Ho Chi Minh.

Most of the leaders in the 1930's became cognizant of the current and future political realities for Vietnam. Too many changes had taken place within her own state and in the entire Far East for her ever to

¹Lacouture, Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography, p. 16.
return to her monarchical-type government of yesteryear. Under the impact of the French, a social transformation had engulfed Vietnam. Her economy was partially modernized by the creation of large rubber plantations, mines, construction projects, small industry, and a large export business. The economy had become more centralized and a class structure had developed. The autonomous village system would never fit into such a system and, therefore, was gone forever. This condition was further intensified by a similar process which had engrossed most of Vietnam's powerful neighbors. China, Vietnam's giant and historical enemy to the north, was also in a state of social transformation. She had been exploited by the West and was now trying to modernize her society in order to regain her sovereignty. Japan had already modernized her state; she had defeated Russia in a war and was recognized as a major power. In addition, Western influence was a permanent factor for the Eastern states to contend with. In such an international arena, a stable but static Confucian-type state could not compete and, therefore, exist with the dynamic, ever advancing, Western type state whose concepts were based on science and technology. French rule would have to be replaced by some type of a central government which would unite the forces of Vietnamese society from the top of government to the village level.

As explained in the body of this paper, the ICP had been contained by the colonists, but they had not been able to liquidate it as they had other rebellions. However, World War II gave Ho Chi Minh and his lieutenants the opportunity and the time to organize the latent and the common national aspirations of the people into an effective national force. This new party was called the Viet Minh. Its political
organization, which was authoritarian in nature, ruled all levels of government. When the French returned after World War II, the Viet Minh were strong enough to fight a war of attrition.

The Decisive Variable

The French reconquest efforts had the most success in the South for two reasons; immediately after World War II, the French had the massive and powerful help of the British military; and secondly, the Viet Minh organization was not as well prepared in the South as in the North. It must be noted, however, that the French never regained complete control over any region of Vietnam. Even more significant, when the French attempted to build a Vietnamese government and army, which were to act as a counterweight to the Viet Minh, they were never effective. The people did not accept the puppet government and its army lacked a fighting spirit. Such a diabolical scheme to get the Vietnamese to fight Vietnamese for the French ends only further increased the people's resentment toward the French. Realizing that the Viet Minh was the major anticolonial power, the people became more adamant in their support of Ho Chi Minh.

After the French failed to gain a quick victory over the Viet Minh, the war became one of attrition. Then, what proved to be the decisive variable was the commitment of the two peoples: the Vietnamese and the French. The Vietnamese perceived the war as one in which their national survival was at stake. They were willing to make infinite sacrifices to gain ultimate victory. The French people, on the other hand, were scarcely aware that the war was going on until 1953. At that point in
time, it became clear to metropolitan France that the Indochina War was adversely affecting their economy. If the war was to continue, the French people would have to sacrifice further materials needed by their own economy which was trying to recover from World War II. Most French people did not perceive any benefit for them from a French victory on a remote peninsula in Southeast Asia. If the war was going to cost them anything, then they wanted none of it.

Under mounting public opinion to get out of the "dirty little war," in 1954 the French Government took advantage of Ho Chi Minh's amendable attitude for a negotiated settlement as mentioned earlier in this paper. As the shooting war came to an end and France started to withdraw her forces, victory belonged to the nationalistic aspirations and courage of the Vietnamese people. Victory had been obtained by a nationalistic effort: a common people; fighting a common enemy; for a common cause; and for a common destiny.
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